The Best Worst Kept Secret in Ketterdam

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The Best Worst Kept Secret in Ketterdam

by FairytalesOfForever

Summary

She's really not their child, they promise.
Unfortunately, she has other ideas:
Cue the Parent Trap, but with trauma.
Updates Fridays

Notes

I'm attempting a long fic because I have a death wish, or something.
Quick note! This won't come in for a while, but the wiki says Alby is seven in CK. I don't trust the wiki and don't like that, so I say he was two or three then, which makes him 4/5 when this story starts.

Inej/Kaz

Chapter Summary

> Inej returns to Ketterdam with an unexpected guest. Kaz is disappointed that people don't try harder to kill him.

Almost two years now, and the sea air is too clean in Inej's mouth. There's an absence of Ketterdam, of the smoke and starkly human scents, perfume and garbage and sweat; she doesn't miss it, quite, but she feels it, like the gap of a missing tooth. You don't long for the wiggling and the pain of the what's gone, maybe you taste the blood, but your tongue finds the empty space just the same. The salt and sun and silence are like that for Inej, even after this long, and she can't decide if she likes it.

Certainly, she loves this mission; every life she saves from her own fate feels, somehow, like recovering a piece of herself that vanished during those long nights. She's often felt that in leaving her body behind, she lost things; that she healed wrong, and that makes her think of Kaz. She had thought that she would never see those parts of herself again, and yet here she finds them, scattered across the sea—even if they don't quite fit right with the armor she's grown in their place. It's a dangerous, wondrous thing.

But even if she has found her aim, does she miss Ketterdam? She's soon to find out, she knows; by this evening at the latest, the *Wraith* will be at berth twenty-two and the Wraith will be back on the city's rooftops. Back at the Slat. Back on Kaz's window, feeding the crows, unless they've stopped coming while she's been gone. She wonders, as another tangy breeze strikes her face and lifts loose strands of her hair, if that smell of ink and coffee still lingers around him, and then wonders why she cares.

Maybe that's what she feels missing in the briny taste of the wind.

Her first weeks at sea, Inej had spent more time in the rigging than not, desperate to climb something. She'd understood for once the constant restlessness that kept Jesper in motion and even wondered briefly if this was right, if her aim had been true. But then they took down their first slaver's ship, and their second, and by the time captains began coming up with names for her, titles like Kaz had earned, she knew better. They can call her the Reaper of Ships, the Scourge of the Seas, call her what they like, as long as no one ever calls her lynx again.

Now she takes to the nets as a kind of comfort, feeling safest when the thing between her and falling is thin. It makes her feel stronger, sheer dependence on her muscles and balance and—quite possibly—stubbornness. When she stands in the sky, a knife in her hand rather than the usual privateer's cutlass, and sees nothing but waves beneath, how could her aim not be true?

One of the girls—Inej's crew is mostly female—calls to her from below. As she expected, they'll be in Ketterdam by early evening. Inej grabs hold of a rope and swings down to the deck, lifted for a moment on the thrill of the wind. She sticks a seamless landing even with the ground moving beneath her; that, she doesn't like to admit, took some learning.

"What's the first thing you'll do when you get back?" asks another girl, Kaelish, with a tall and emphatic build like Nina's. Her face is buried in freckles from this trip and her accent lilts.

Inej gives a small smile. "Take a bath and a nap."

In that order.

Her hair and clothes are looser than they were back in the city, a messier braid and a billowy blouse; she's almost certain that both are crusted with salt by now. The fresh water they have, after all, is best used for drinking.

"It's *Ketterdam*," her lookout, a Zemeni girl almost as tall as Jesper, protests. "Surely there's something you want to see, somewhere you want to go?"

"If I haven't seen my fill of Ketterdam by now, perhaps I never will," Inej replies. Turning and changing tack, she asks, "How is she?"

As if he'd heard her, Specht, one of the exceptions, emerges onto the deck, holding a baby girl in his arms with surprising tenderness. Well, not a baby, exactly; the girl is a toddler, somewhere around three, and at least half Suli. Inej takes her and settles the nameless child on her hip.

"Good, considering," Specht replies. He looks amusingly bereft now that Inej has taken the little girl.

Considering, indeed. The girl, whom Inej knows she should name, was taken with her mother, who had sickened and died on the slavers' ship, from what Inej and her knives could discern from the crew. She knows, with a feeling that tightens her stomach more than the waves ever could, that if not for her the child would have been killed—or worse, left to die.

Inej hands the little girl back to Specht and hoists herself back into the ropes. If she can help it, she wants to be the first person to see that skyline she knows so well. And perhaps even despite her words, some part of her knows that the first thing she'll want to do when her feet hit the docks is climb, discover it all again.

Climb to the Slat.

See if her room is still there.

See Kaz.

Inej sighs, even though nobody can see her face up here or see inside her head. It's not the first time she has thought of him, nor will it be the last. Does she want to see him? Does she want to fight for the beginning that she hasn't forgotten? The little girl will complicate things.

And maybe he's hardened in her absence. Maybe, even if she doesn't seem to know better, he will.

Kaz allowed her to leave. Kaz propelled her to leave. Kaz gave her a ship and she put a dream in its sails. There are so many places where the paths diverge, where another could-have-been grows—there are so many lives that they could have lead, and for all Inej knows, in some versions she never meets Kaz. But those are not what is. This is what happened.

Maybe she'll get enough calluses from the ropes to forget the softness of his hands. Maybe she'll sleep enough nights on a hard and unforgiving bed to forget the feeling of laying her head on his shoulder. Maybe she'll visit her parents enough that they won't ask after him anymore.

For her next voyage is to Ravka, to the farm they're renting until they can reunite with their caravan. Hopefully, the little girl will be safe with them. A stop in Ketterdam to re-supply and say her hellos, and then she's going home. If it can be so called. If she even sticks to the plan. She's worked with Kaz long enough to know that in every plan, there are more things that can go wrong than steps.

Inej pushes away a loose strand of hair and leans out over the deck. She needs to stop thinking about Kaz or they could end up going the wrong direction.

"Prepare your things for when we reach land!" she calls. And that's another thing, another part of being captain: the Wraith has learned to be loud.

The chorus of shouts in reply buoys Inej, and, clinging to the rope, she hangs out into the wind like a flag; whatever awaits her in Ravka, whatever awaits her in Ketterdam, she will not wish for it. She will meet it as it comes.

"No mourners, no funerals," she whispers to herself.

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Kaz has a knee pinning the man's chest and a knife in the man's side. The sad part is, he's not angry, at least not by his standards.

This sorry sod tried to attack him, and since he bears no gang tattoos and fights with a polished style, Kaz can best discern that someone hired him. It's almost funny. Especially since it's the attacker's own knife that now sticks out from beneath his ribs.

Shadows play over the man's face as he sobs, illuminating in their absence scars and grimy cheeks smudged with tears and snot. The man whimpers, making Kaz hate him a little. *At least don't die like a keening infant.*

"Now, for a last-ditch effort, this is just sad," says Kaz, his lip curled. "It's clear that's what you are—some skilled fighter or assassin who thought that was all it took to survive in the Barrel." Knowing how to use your fists means nothing if you aren't ruthless enough to hit where it will hurt the most.

The man stares at him with unbridled horror, satiating the manic something that has broken loose in Kaz these past years.

“I was born without manners,” Kaz continues, pushing the man’s head back sharply, “but even I have the good grace to be insulted.”

Strangely, the man looks less terrified now and more appalled. Well, it’s not going to keep Kaz up at night, not when he has more important things keeping him awake. In a strained, choked voice thick with tears and revulsion, the man gasps out, “You’re heartless.”

“True. You’ll have no luck finding my heart here.” Kaz pulls out the knife, rises, and straightens his tie. Sorry sod, indeed. He would wipe the knife on his trousers, but that would ruin the point of wearing them.

He turns away.

“You’d be better off searching the seas.”

Kaz

Chapter Summary

> Kaz receives a visitor in his office. She makes him a request—or an offer, depending on how you look at it.

Chapter Notes

> Me @ Kaz this entire chapter: haha simp

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz's leg is killing him. He sinks into the chair behind his desk and stretches it out, though it does little to ease the throbbing from too many late nights and too many flights of stairs. At some past point, he'd left Per Haskell's old office and decided that the climb was worth having the Slat's attic to himself, but sometimes he wonders.

It's neither safe nor worth it, though, to second-guess oneself. Can't afford it in the Barrel.

Can't afford it when you're Kaz Brekker.

He stares down at the open ledger, willing the figures and sums to march into his head in orderly lines. They refuse, however, to make enough sense that it's worth memorizing them. Kaz pulls off his gloves, neatly, one finger at a time, and rakes his hands through his hair. Focus.

Something, however, makes the short-shorn hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He doesn't raise his head or turn, doesn't move from studying the books, but his senses are instantly alive, enough to pick up the scent of saltwater over the ever-present Ketterdam rain.

He could put the pieces together, but he doesn't dare.

Hope, as he once told Inej, is dangerous.

So the only movement he makes is to slip his gloves back on and bend his bad leg, ready for a fight if it comes. The movement aches, but a blow he's not prepared for will hurt worse.

"Kaz."

He's prepared and it hurts. It's a dull and desperate pang, like the hunger he knew when he was a starving, feral boy fresh out of the harbor. He turns around and oh, Saints, Djel,

Ghezen, he sees her. The sight of her makes a boy with no gods feel like praying.

“You’re back,” he says. There’s a catch in his rasp, rough since the plague; anything he might think of to say has vanished from his tongue, and his voice is reeling with the rest of him. It sounds wrong. He feels wrong, but also like nothing has made sense in the last seven months. He doesn’t like how Inej sets his world spinning into a kaleidoscope of paradoxes. He needs it.

“It’s not like you to state the obvious,” she says, tilting her head to one side. Her hair is oil-slick from the rain, and the blouse that would normally billow from the corset around her waist hangs off of her in loose folds. He can see more through it than he wants to. *Does* he want to? He shifts his eyes before he has the chance to think about it, despite the fact that he’s had far from his fill of looking at her. Too many men have looked at her this way, like it’s their right, like it’s what she’s there for. He refused to mark her body, and he refuses to admire it now.

“I believe things more from my own mouth,” he replies at last, simply because it’s the first thing to pop into his mind. He’s staring at the wall over her shoulder, but he can still see the seashell curve of her ear and the loose black strands clinging around it. He’s starting to wish she had never returned, but all the same he never wants her to leave.

When his eyes turn back to her face, she’s pursing her lips disapprovingly at him. They look soft. He stretches his leg back out, forces his mind away from the impossible.

Finally, she says, “Yes, I’m back.” It almost sounds like a challenge, paired with the new ferocity in her black eyes. Maybe it is.

“For how long?” Kaz asks, as conversationally as he can. He’s twiddling his pen through his fingers, absentmindedly making it disappear and reappear. It requires just enough brainpower that he can’t think too much about Inej. If only something would distract him enough that he couldn’t think about her at all.

“Just a few days.” She takes a few steps forward, enough to lean on the desk; watching him carefully, she hoists herself onto it, sitting on a patch of space that’s clear of his papers. She is close enough now that her feet dangle just beside his outstretched leg. It takes a concerted effort for Kaz to not hold his breath.

He wonders if he should answer the question in her eyes, tell her she’s not too close, but he doesn’t trust his voice any longer, and he’s not going to tell her to go away. His eyes find her now, they can’t stop finding her; her braid is looser, her skin deeper bronze, she has an earring in one ear, but it’s the things that are the same that he looks for. Those are the things about Inej that matter to him; the things about her that don’t change. They are the reasons she is the only person he trusts.

“Where to next, then?” he asks. His head tilted back and his cane leaning on one leg, he is the picture of mild interest, an old colleague, perhaps even an old friend. He knows better, and Inej probably does too, so why bother?

He’s not sure he knows how to do anything else.

“Ravka,” Inej responds, bumping her leg against the edge of the desk. Her hands are folded in her lap, her eyes fixed on them. Kaz entertains, for a moment, the fancy that she’s avoiding looking at him for the same reasons he’s trying not to look at her, but dismisses it. Hope, as he has to keep telling himself, is dangerous. It’s the kind of thing that drives people like Jesper to the tables and their coin into Kaz’s purse. He refuses to be in anyone’s debt.

“What awaits the Wraith in Ravka?” he asks, putting his pen down and resting his fingertips on the desk.

Inej turns to him and raises one black brow, her earlier confidence returning to her demeanor. It seems, however, as if she’s hiding something. “The Wraith, or the *Wraith*?”

“Well, I would be concerned if one arrived without the other,” Kaz replies, although his concern (that’s one word, he thinks) would be considerably stronger in one circumstance than the other. He’ll entertain it for now, but he knows she’s stalling.

Inej tips her head back and closes her eyes, the line of her throat like a golden ladle. Kaz wonders briefly if his lantern has gone out and she’s lighting the room in its stead.

“My parents,” she says, her eyes still closed. “They’re renting a farm until they can re-join their caravan, and...I want to see them before they do.”

“You’re going home,” Kaz replies, almost questioning.

“I don’t know if it is my home,” Inej says, sitting up again and staring straight ahead. “But Ketterdam was no place for them, certainly with me gone. They’ve had lives these past years, Kaz.”

The sound of his name in her mouth makes him happy he’d kept that much of his old self. “I suppose you told them a Suli proverb about letting go of what you love.”

She’s silent for a moment, her eyes trained on the floor, one leg swinging a rhythmic beat against the edge of his desk. At last, so quietly that he almost misses it, she says, “You would know.”

Kaz’s hand flattens against the desk and he finds himself conscious of how close she is. He’s no fool; he hears her meaning. And maybe she’s right. But if hope is dangerous, love is lethal. It’s good for nothing but revenge.

Still...the wonderings he’s kept alive, these months, imagining her return...she’s leading him into something. Only with Inej is he willing to not be several steps ahead.

As she had once, he asks her, “What do you want, Inej?”

“Come with me.”

They both startle at the words, as if a ghost spoke them, but Kaz looks at her and finds her black eyes burning into his, the voids left behind by twin dying stars. She is sitting upright now, leaning towards him like a tree that was bent by a storm and kept growing that way.

She smells of the sea. Somehow that bothers him. She never used to have a scent.

“Come with you?” he repeats, letting her lead him.

“To Ravka. To see my parents.”

“I’ve already met your parents. And I have business to run here.”

“Kaz.”

She looks no less serious, and it’s like she knows what he means to say before he says it. It falls from his lips. He should know better by now.

“Yes.”

The rain whispers against the window. Inej stands, some farewell in her eyes that never reaches her tongue. She doesn’t need to say it; Kaz knows she’ll be back.

He watches her leave and still misses the precise moment that she disappears, like a magic trick he’ll try to crack until dawn.

Chapter End Notes

> Am I allowed to be proud of “The sight of her makes a boy with no gods feel like praying?” Like, is that okay?
> Because I did a little writer happy dance about that line. Which, if you are not a writer or are not in possession of one, consists primarily of flailing about in one’s chair like a maniac.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej and her surprise guest arrive at the Van Eck mansion.

The trip to Jesper and Wylan's is even wetter than the climb to the Slat was, and by the time Inej slips in through a second-story window, she is thoroughly soaked and missing her old gear, which was much better suited to Ketterdam's weather. She holds the end of her braid out the window as she perches on the sill, beneath the awning, and tries to wring some of the rainwater out of it, but she might just have to settle for dripping on the floors. She has a feeling that Wylan will forgive her.

Indeed, when she makes her way downstairs on silent feet, he looks up at her from the chair he's nestled in and his face breaks into a smile. "Inej! We heard you were coming back."

"I was hoping you'd get the letter," she replies. "And lucky I could trust you to take me even if you hadn't. Even if I am dripping on your carpet."

Wylan grins and rises from his chair to greet her. "You could have come in the front door."

"But would I?" asks Inej. She catches movement in the corner of her eye and turns slightly to spot the approach of Jesper, who is garbed in such a vivid array of citrus shades that he couldn't be missed against the austere decor if he wanted to.

"You didn't honestly expect her to use the door, did you?" he asks, loping over and resting an elbow on Wylan's shoulder.

The shorter boy shrugs him off; he replaces his elbow and Wylan gives a long-suffering sigh.

Inej doesn't quite suppress a smile.

"How's the world? I'm sure you've seen most of it by now," asks Wylan.

Jesper grins at her. "And I'm sure it wasn't near ready for you."

"Just as good and just as bad as you would expect, I think," Inej answers Wylan, finishing her descent of the staircase to stand on the landing. "Evil men are still kidnapping girls and mothers are still making skillet bread. I like to think that I'm tipping the scales."

"You should see West Stave these days," says Jesper with a shake of his head. "Three houses closed in the last six months."

Inej finds it hard to swallow, let alone ask him which ones. The gratitude in the eyes of the boys and girls she saves is one thing; to know that here, in Ketterdam, they are feeling the wake of the *Wraith*, is another thing altogether.

"How is it, being back?" Wylan asks, shrugging Jesper's elbow off with finality and answering, "You're too bony," to the other's pout, though a fond smile plays around his lips. "Have you seen Kaz yet?"

"Is it that obvious?" Inej almost wonders if she should tell them about the little girl, as she almost told Kaz...but she didn't. She still isn't sure why. But why would Kaz Brekker, of all people, care about something like that? Aren't the only lives that matter to him still the ones he can use?

Maybe not, Inej thinks, recalling the look in his eyes when he saw her. There and then gone, as wily as a shadow, but something. He would tell her that it's dangerous to hope.

"We've been trying to talk him into coming for dinner," says Jesper, breaking her from her thoughts. "Maybe he actually will now that you're here."

"It's Kaz," Inej replies. "Try not to have expectations; he'll always break them."

Wylan grins. "Well, on the odd chance that he shows up and you want to settle in before then, your room's upstairs. The one on the end of the hall? Might have been the one you climbed into, actually."

"You may never know," Inej teases.

"I'm sure we won't," he replies with a brief shake of his head.

"Don't take too long!" Jesper calls after her as she begins to ascend the staircase. "We want to hear about the places you've been. And the new swear words you've learned."

"She can take as long as she needs," she hears Wylan say.

And while Inej is eager to spend all the time with her friends that she can, she made a promise to her crew—a bath and a nap, in that order. And it's one she intends to keep.

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Inej can't quite stop a sigh from escaping her lips as she sinks into the hot water. Usually, she's as quick as possible to clean herself, but this once she'll let herself luxuriate in the warmth and the bubbles, at least for a few minutes. It's a novel thing after years on a ship and in the Barrel, after all.

She tips her head back, soaking her hair; the water is soothing aches that she didn't realize she had, and she can't bring herself to mind it. She wonders briefly if Kaz would find it to help his leg, then promptly halts her imagination concerning Kaz and baths from going any further. She's not sure she would be capable of anything she might fantasize about, anyway.

It's not just a lack of time that normally leads her to get this over with; she doesn't like to see herself uncovered like this. It's too easy to forget that she was the one to peel away her layers, that she has made the choice to be laid bare. It's too easy to see tracks left on her skin by wandering hands. It's too easy to remember the things Heleen would say on her bad days —*too small, too rough, too flat.* Too easy to remember the praises of her skin like it's a fine silk when it is all she sees.

So she closes her eyes. It's not a perfect thing, but she wants to be able to rest her mind as well, for now. She lets time steal away from her as if it's a Wraith itself, padding on soft feet to return and take her by surprise. Her body, she reminds herself, is what saved her. It's what made her valuable to the Dregs. It's what ties her to her family. It allows her to fulfill her dream of saving others from the fate it bore.

When she rises, then, and wraps herself in a robe that must be Marya's, since it doesn't drown her like Jesper's or even Wylan's would, she can remember the strength of what she sees. She seats herself in front of the fogged-up mirror and begins to weave her wet hair back into a braid, and though she eyes the tubs and jars of creams and cosmetics that Marya has laid out beside the sink, she wouldn't know the first thing to do with them.

Once Inej has finished her braid, coiled it at the nape of her neck, and re-fastened her earring, she pads out into the adjoining room, where she'd hung her clothes to dry. They're still damp, but luckily she had left a few things here in anticipation of future stays. Her fingers drift over the folded pieces: black, purple, deep blue. Cotton and leather, skintight. Nothing like the billowing linen she knows now. Well, it'll be familiar all the same.

She leaves the hood and mask behind, but the asymmetrical jacket and sleek black pants still fit her. At least her body hasn't changed much, if her mind has. She didn't really expect anything different.

That nap might have to wait, she thinks, glancing at the clock, and instead makes her way to the staircase. Dry and in these clothes, it feels familiar to slide down the banister and slip from the post at its end, making her way from there into the dining room. Wylan is messing with the silverware, or maybe laying it out, and Jesper is trying to get away with putting his feet up on the table. Wylan appears to be the more successful of the two.

Inej drops her eyes to the plates and utensils. "I thought your father's servants stuck around."

"They did," says Wylan, switching the order of two forks that look identical to Inej. "And I let them, because they need a living wage. Doesn't mean I'm going to make them do things that I can do myself."

The stern, aproned older woman in the corner would appear to disagree, but to her credit, she says nothing and disappears into the kitchen.

"Things that Jesper should be helping with," Wylan adds, giving a pointed look to the tipped-back chair and its occupant.

Inej picks up a fork from the basket that rests on the table. "Where do these go?"

“Ah ah,” says Jesper, reaching over with one absurdly long arm and sliding the fork from her grip. “You’re our guest.”

“And what’s your excuse?” asks Wylan, “accidentally” jabbing the Zemeni with a plate. “Anyway, we’re only setting the table for four, and that’s being hopeful.”

“All right, then,” says Inej, picking up the basket that holds the remaining silverware and plates. “Where does this go?”

“Somewhere you’re too short to reach anyway,” says Jesper, finally standing to scoop up the basket and stow it away on a shelf on the opposite wall.

Inej purses her lips. “And reaching high places has stopped being my specialty? Why did no one inform me?”

“Guest,” Jesper repeats in a sing-song voice. As if to echo him, the door knocker falls; after a brief shared glance among the three of them, Inej makes for the door first.

Forget what Kaz said; she feels hope blossoming through her like the warmth brought by her mother’s tea, and she gives it free reign, her steps speeding almost to a run. She stops at the door and rests her hand on its knob for a bare fraction of a second.

It isn’t Kaz.

“Fionn?” Inej says blankly, looking at her Kaelish crewmate. Then her eyes fall to the child in the redhead’s arms. “Oh.”

Fionn shifts the little girl’s weight. “I’d thought she would be safer with you than where most of us are staying. Not that Specht didn’t try.”

Inej smiles softly, adjusting to this like it’s a wobble of the wire or a change in the wind. “You weren’t followed,” she says, raising an eyebrow as she takes the little girl. It’s not quite a question. She trusts her crew.

“Nobody stands out here,” says Fionn. “And you’re in the rich part of town. Nice, by the way. Lucky.”

Inej strokes the toddler’s downy hair. The Kaelish believe in luck; she’s not sure that she does. “Still, be careful going back. Even without her.”

“You know me,” says Fionn, tightening her ginger ponytail. “Almost as quiet as you.”

When you want to be. Inej presses her lips together as the girl leaves, thinking of the bawdy sea shanties Fionn likes to belt out. She and Nina would have gotten along.

She’s two steps into the parlor before she realizes how this looks—her with a little Suli girl who’s as old as Inej has been gone—but by then Jesper is already staring at her.

“Well, *that’s* not Kaz,” he says, strolling up to offer the little girl a hand to grab. She blinks dark eyes at him and clings closer to Inej.

Jesper scoffs. “Rude.” His attitude is playful, but there’s a seriousness in his eyes as he looks at Inej, and she sighs.

“She’s not mine.”

Jesper laughs nervously. “Well of course, I mean, I wouldn’t think—”

Inej shakes her head softly, smiling. “Of course you would. And why would I mind that you did? We rescued her a few weeks ago from a ship that had taken her mother.”

“The mother?” Jesper asks, but the deepening of his brow tells Inej that he already knows the answer, so she just thins her lips disappointedly.

“Poor nub.” He looks sadly at the girl as Wylan enters.

“Uh, what’s—who—?”

“Fear not,” says Inej, sinking into a chair to rest the girl on her lap. She’s strong, but a child of almost three is heavy standing like this. “She’s not mine.”

“Nor anyone’s now,” Jesper says, taking the chair opposite hers.

“Ours then,” says Wylan, kneeling in front of Inej’s chair. How she appreciates him for making nothing of it! The child is shy with him too, but he doesn’t seem to mind. “All of ours.”

That seems to make Jesper think. “Does Kaz—?”
He’s interrupted by the sound of the knocker once again.

“Saved any other lost babies?” he asks nervously.

Wylan opens the door, and Inej says, “No.”

Kaz’s collar is turned up and his hat is pulled down, but she still sees his eyes find the little girl.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz jumps to conclusions. The little girl recieves a name.

Chapter Notes

You look stressed, my friend.
presents you with a tiny Kaz
he glares at all of the things that are bothering you and scares them away
Ta-da!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej is holding a little girl—a little Suli girl with eyes like lost moons. Kaz's world seems to stutter to a halt.

He doesn't say anything—what can he say? He generally prefers to be reticent where feelings are involved, anyway.

Besides, he tells himself strictly, *It's not as if you were under contract. She deserves better than you; so what if she found it? You tried, and it wasn't enough.*

Jordie's voice interjects. *Cut your losses, Kaz.*

Kaz stands straighter, his posture stiffer. He looks at Inej, and regardless of the argument he's been drafting against himself, pain worse than a gunshot knifes through him.

He's close to leaving and never saying a word. He wants to leave. But there's no way to do so without making it excruciatingly obvious why.

So.

"Hello, Wraith," he says. Cordially, formally, former employer to erstwhile spider who was never in the curtain call of his daydreams. The one he sent away from Ketterdam to responsibly dispose of a distraction. Bad for business to lose her, but worse to keep her. For business and business alone.

The erstwhile spider, however, is set on being more direct. "I should have told you about the baby," says Inej, and then her eyes go wider. She presses her face to the top of the little girl's head, embarrassed. "That came out wrong."

Why is Jesper *laughing?* Kaz will break his nose, show him what's funny. Maybe pop out a few of those pearly teeth while he's at it.

"I was just telling Jesper," Inej says with an awkward bob of her head, "she's not mine. We saved her from a slaver's ship a few weeks ago."

Oh.

Yet again, the world seems to re-shape itself, and Kaz is faced with the terrifying prospect of his dangerous hopes being possible again. He grips the head of his cane more tightly, his face smooth to assure no one's noticed.

"You can come in, you know," Wylan pipes up, rising from the floor and taking a seat by Jesper.

Kaz steps in with a tap of his cane against the floor and stands there. He still can't think of anything to say, but they don't have a right to expect him to talk. He came; that's enough, he decides.

And they don't need to fear for silence, for the little girl in Inej's lap lets out a delighted gurgle and stretches out her hands. Kaz stares at her. It's a bizarrely happy sound to his ears.

Jesper makes an offended noise and Inej beams. Kaz gets that feeling again, like the lights have gone out and she's illuminating the room all by herself.

"She likes you," Inej says.

Kaz coughs skeptically. "Wonderful."

The toddler gives another insistent noise and almost topples out of Inej's lap. Inej raises her eyebrows. "I think she wants to come say hello."

"Can she actually say anything?" Kaz asks. "Does she know Kerch?"

"Some," Inej replies with all the pride of a young mother. It hurts Kaz to hear it, and he's not sure why. "She—"

"Man. Hat man," says the child, in decent Kerch for a three-year-old.

Kaz gives Inej a long-suffering look. "No."

"Oh, come on!" Jesper protests. "Of course the one person she likes is the one who wants nothing to do with her."

"Maybe you're secretly a kid person, Kaz," says Wylan. "You know, when you're not threatening to murder their families."

Kaz cuts his eyes sideways at Wylan, not caring enough to bring out his full glare. "No."

"Hat man," the toddler says again. "Hat stick man."

“Those names are going to get less complimentary the longer you refuse,” Inej advises. “She’s been living on a ship, remember?”

As if to prove Inej’s point, the little girl swears with a respectable amount of gusto at nobody in particular. Inej gives her a disapproving look.

Kaz, on the other hand, considers himself won over—or just worn down. He takes the empty chair next to Inej, which he suspects was left empty on purpose. His crew should really stop trying to play criminal mastermind when they know full well that it’s his business and they can’t pull it off anyway.

“Does she have a name?” he asks as Inej lets the girl down to walk, presumably over to him.

“Not yet. My crew couldn’t agree,” Inej replies. Kaz eyes the little girl, who is making a beeline for his cane, with some trepidation. She’ll have to learn to not be so obvious about what she wants.

“How about letting an outsider choose, then?” asks Jesper, sitting up a bit straighter.

Kaz scowls. Whatever they’re going to call her, the kid’s got a hold of his cane now. At least he still has the other end, and better the cane than his leg. Or his hand.

Inej narrows her eyes, a smirk playing around her lips. Kaz tries not to focus too much on the shadows cast by her lashes and the lamplight on her face. “I’m not sure I trust you with that,” she says.

“And me?” asks Wylan, leaning on the arm of his chair as if he thinks a cheeky smile will make Inej pick him.

Maybe I ought to try it sometime.

“I’m sure all the names you know are family names, or impossibly Kerch,” says Inej. “She ought to be able to learn her own name.”

“Mine’s not that bad!” Wylan protests.

“Well, I don’t think we’re naming her ‘Wylan’,” Inej replies teasingly.

“It is a good name, though,” Jesper reassures.

Kaz looks down at the little girl, who’s tired of grabbing his cane and is now repeating “Hat,” over and over.

“Stop that, Jordan,” he murmurs. The name feels funny on his tongue, like a shirt shoved into the back of a drawer that you haven’t worn in years, like it doesn’t fit right, but it could.

She pauses and blinks absurdly round eyes at him. “Stop?” she asks, stuttering a bit over the Kerch consonants.

Kaz sighs heavily and drops his hat onto her head, most of which it engulfs. “Happy now?” he asks roughly, and turns his eyes back to the others.

They’re still bickering; Jesper is evidently insisting that Llewellyn is gender-neutral.

“Jordan,” says Kaz.

They all look at him, including the little girl, who has preemptively become Jordan in his mind. He’s trying out the idea, drafting a plan to see if it fits.

She is still wearing his hat.

Inej is not just looking at him but rather giving him a *look*, probably because she knows. She knows more than Jesper and Wylan do. “Jordan?” she asks. Now the little girl looks at her, pushing up the brim of Kaz’s hat to do so. At least the kid learns fast.

“I guess she likes it,” says Wylan.

Inej is smiling at the child and her oversized hat, a soft smile, effervescent almost, like the glow around the edges of a flame. And like that glow, she seems to make Kaz’s world shift and shimmer like heat waves in the air.

“But ‘Jordan’ is Kerch, sort of!” Jesper protests. “You, Captain Ghafa, are playing favorites.”

“If she were,” Kaz puts in, lifting his hat from Jordan’s head, “it wouldn’t be me.”

Inej slits a look at him but carries on. “It’s a good name—Jordan. And she likes it better than yours.”

“Rude, again,” Jesper mutters, but he’s grinning.

“Jordan?” Jordan questions.

“Yep,” says Wylan, “that’s you.”

She appears to contemplate this for a moment. Everyone else pays rapt attention. Kaz sighs. Children.

“Jordan eat,” she pronounces. “Food.”

Kaz shrugs. “You did invite me for dinner, not an impromptu baby shower.”

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Jordan seems to have warmed to Jesper and Wylan, if for no other reason than that she likes her new name, so they escort her into the dining room, each holding one of her hands. It looks so familial. Kaz won’t say he’s jealous of them, but there is something there.

With Wylan, Jesper, and most importantly, Jordan effectively out of the way, Kaz flicks his cane in front of the door to stop Inej, who’s following him. She tips her head but looks

unsurprised.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” he says quietly, his eyes fixed on the molding at the base of the wall.

“Kaz?” she asks.

“Was that the truth?” he queries roughly. “That she’s not yours?” He doesn’t say ‘Jordan’, because that’s worse, to name Inej’s child by someone else after his brother. It’s too many layers of loss. Too much trust broken.

Now he risks looking at her. Maybe he shouldn’t have. Her brow is furrowed, eyes dark with hurt. He’d put a bullet in anyone else who put that look on her face, but he has to know.

“No,” Inej says firmly. “Why would I lie to you about that, anyway?”

Illusions of a hope he doesn’t have. Are they illusions? Has he allowed himself too much already?

“Don’t try to protect me. Trying to save me was hopeless enough. Don’t make it worse.”

Inej looks away, and the shadows dance over her face, her braided coil of hair gleaming. “I was right. You’re the same as before.”

Before? When he heard magic in her laugh, when he saw the universe in her eyes, when her touch brought him the possibility of salvation after all. He hasn’t escaped any of that. It is yet another weakness he can’t fight, but maybe he can turn it into a strength like the others.

So he says nothing.

Inej goes on, angrily now in earnest. “And you know exactly what it would take to do that. Maybe you’ve forgotten when you’ve gotten selfish and cold these years, but it’s not just hard for you, Kaz. I couldn’t have a child if I wanted to.”

Kaz feels like he should do something. He flexes his fingers in his gloves, but childish though it may be, he needs the feeling of safety. Maybe he’s proving her right by it.

“So she’s not yours.”

“She’s as good as.” Inej’s tone is cooler now, steel. “I am all she has in the world. You used to care about that.”

“You assume that because you were alone. But you are one of a kind.” He realizes too late the implication that he cares about her, but doesn’t amend it. “Is that why you’re really going back to Ravka?”

“Don’t let yourself start feeling clever for that, Kaz, but yes,” Inej replies, straightening the corset with her knives strapped to it. “So then you’re not coming?”

“The deal is the deal,” says Kaz, rapping his cane against the floor once. Simple, efficient, uncomplicated. If only things were actually that way.

Inej purses her lips. “See you in there,” she says, and joins the others in the dining room.

Kaz, for his part, is left with the bitter aftertaste of a mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Big name reveal, wool woop!
I am loving your comments so far; in fact, maybe I’ll start doing a shoutout, so keep doing that thing. It feeds the author. (Authors are generally very low-maintenance pets, but they do require sustenance every once in a while.)

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan learns some new words, invents the next high-stakes betting game, and meets her first true love: Kaz's coat.

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be a dual POV story, but Jordan insisted otherwise, so here you go.

Annnnd I promised comment shout-outs, so here we go!

andyoudoctor, for commenting on every chapter, eeee thank you! I love long comments and you oblige my nonsense every time.

Juxtaposie, I hope you're enjoying where we're going ;)

Cherokee, thanks for noticing my little joke! I will not stop making that reference ever.

Appretiartis, I hope you liked the reaction <3

PrincessKittyKat52, I agree with your assessment of Kaz and appreciate your assessment of my writing. Welcome to the multiple comments squad!

lilieswho, did I mention how much I love long comments? Because I LOVE THEM.

Thank you all and keep 'em coming! Also, if you have any ideas for upcoming chapters, I'm happy to hear them :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan is swinging over the city in a sling of dark cloth. She peers over the edge and sees the winding streets, buildings, windows down below; she sees people, little like the bugs that Mama One used to tell her to stomp on and make them go *squish.* Jordan always liked that part, the *squish* part. She likes making things go *squish,* in general.

And her view is always moving, always changing, because she's slung against Mama Two's chest, and Mama Two is climbing over the roofs and spires of the city, invisible to the bug-people beneath. Jordan is invisible too. She feels Mama Two's heartbeat where they're pressed together, and likes the secret of it all.

She peeks up over Mama Two's shoulder; the city smoke and Mama Two's loose hairs tickle her and she sneezes.

"Shh," Mama Two murmurs. "We're almost there." She's using Mama One words, like she always does when it's just her and Jordan.

Jordan is learning that there are two words for everything; there are Mama One words—the words she knows better—and Mama Two/Hat Man/Tall Stick Man/Red Boy words. Mama Two uses Mama One words when they're alone, like now, but when they're around the others, like last night, or even Freckle Girl and Stick Girl and Arm-Pictures-Man on the Good Small Boat (as opposed to Big Bad Boat), she uses these other words, words that clash and clatter and hop around like little frogs.

"Where?" Jordan asks, in Mama One words, since she knows them better.

"To see your friend from last night, Kaz." Mama Two hops over the gap onto the next roof and Jordan does her very big-girl best to not squeal excitedly.

She tries out the new word, *Kaz,* but it doesn't suit her tongue; the 'Z' sound slips and slithers through her teeth, and she scowls, as much as a three-year-old round-faced child can.

Mama Two laughs. She has such a pretty laugh that Jordan doesn't even mind that she got it wrong. Now they're slipping under the eaves of a funny crooked house, out of the mist and onto a windowsill. Mama Two plays with the latch and slips inside, and Jordan ducks so she doesn't bonk her head on the top of the window.

Inside, there's a bed on one wall, a chest of drawers with a basin on top against the other, and a desk near the door, behind which sits—

"Hat man!" Jordan crows. He isn't wearing his hat right now, but that just means it'll be easier for her to get her hands on.

He looks up over his shoulder at them. He's not wearing a big dark coat that Jordan wants to hide in like last night; just a white shirt, jacket, and vest, all boring. But if he isn't wearing the coat, then it's here somewhere, and maybe Jordan can steal it. She wriggles for Mama Two to put her down.

"You're...both here," says Hat Man. He's using those other frog words. Jordan doesn't quite understand them, but she doesn't need to understand to find his coat.

"Jesper and Wylan are out for the afternoon, and I'm going to pick up supplies with my crew. It's too dangerous for Jordan," says Mama Two. She unties the sling and lets Jordan down, who, having heard her name, is interested again.

Hat Man raises his eyebrows. Jordan likes his eyebrows. They say more than his mouth does. "Are you punishing me, Inej?"

Jordan looks at Mama Two. "Inej?" she repeats. This one sounds like a Mama One word, and sits nicely in Jordan's mouth.

“That’s my name,” says Mama Two, still using frog words. Jordan at least recognizes *my,* so she decides to ask as well as she can.

“That’s my name Jordan?” she asks, thumbing at herself to emphasize her point.

Hat Man just watches her, but his eyebrows say, *Smart.* Jordan is very pleased with herself.

“How do you know I’m not going anywhere?” says Hat Man.

Mama Two crosses her arms. “You forget how much I know. Information is my specialty, Kaz.”

In-firm-a—nope. Too long.

“And there’s nobody else you could go to? I don’t like being cornered.” Jordan understands enough to tell that Hat Man is arguing, and there’s a bite in his voice, but his eyebrows have already given up.

Clearly, Mama Two also understands this, because she smiles her pretty smile—almost as pretty as her laugh—and slips out the window.

Jordan gives Hat Man an appraising look, and sets about looking for his coat.

“What are you doing?” he asks, even though he isn’t looking at her. His voice is rough and scratchy, like a feed sack or a gravel road. He should try some of Mama One’s tea, Jordan thinks.

She understands the ‘what’, and figures he doesn’t understand the strength of her coat fantasies, but he can probably figure it out himself. She’s too busy on her hunt to make conversation. She toddles over to the chest of drawers and opens the bottom one, but it’s just white shirts. The next one, which isn’t very far below the level of her face, has dark fabric in it, which looks more promising, so Jordan starts pawing through it.

“Jordan. Stop that.”

She remembers that word from last night. Stop. She knows what it means. She doesn’t know how to say ‘coat’, though.

“Warm,” she says insistently. “Warm big shirt.”

“You’re cold?” he says impatiently.

Cold. Jordan knows that one. She nods, bobbing up and down on her heels as she does so.

“It’s Ketterdam. It’s always cold. Inej should have given you a coat.”

Was that the word? Jordan heard *Inej* and *cold* , and Mama Two, who must be Inej, would know better than Hat Man and give her a coat, so maybe that’s the word. “Coat,” Jordan repeats back at him.

He sighs. “I knew pirates had parrots, but you, really?”

“You coat,” Jordan insists.

He turns back to his paper. “I’m warm.”

“Me you coat,” Jordan says, stomping her foot. Stupid frog words.

He turns around slowly. It’s scary, but Jordan stands her ground. Maybe she shouldn’t have stomped her foot, though.

When is Mama Two getting back, say his eyebrows. Jordan agrees with them. But he just turns back around, rustling the—wait. Was that on his chair before?

Beaming victoriously, Jordan tiptoes up to the back of his chair, wraps her little fists in the fabric of the coat, and tugs as hard as she can.

His hand slips up and grabs the hem. It’s so fast Jordan barely sees it, and she gives a frustrated whine.

“Maybe one day you’ll learn to steal from me,” he says. “But you’ll have to be better than that.”

Jordan doesn’t know all of those words, but the message is clear enough. She storms over and flomps onto the bed, arms firmly crossed.

Hat Man just goes back to his work.

Jordan doesn’t like him very much anymore.

Since he’s ignoring her, she takes her socks off, which always used to get Mama One’s attention and would probably annoy Mama Two as well. But Hat Man isn’t paying attention. Jordan scowls and decides to devise a game—a game so fun that he will have to admit he’s being a stupid-head and play with her.

Since she has her socks anyway, she slips them over her hands. Now she has a fine pair of puppets, but that’s a boring game. It has to be a competition game. That’s a hard game to play by yourself, but Jordan figures that it has to be fun, because no matter what, she’ll win. But no matter what, she’ll lose, too…

She scrunches up her nose and tries to figure out how to fix this problem. The obvious answer is to have Hat Man play with her, but the point of the game is to *make* him play with her, so no to that. Maybe if she pretends that each hand is its own person—Jordan is good at pretending. When the bad men took her and Mama One, she pretended that it was an adventure. When they were on the ship, she pretended that she was a pirate too. When Mama One got sick, Jordan pretended that she would get better. And when Mama One didn’t wake up, Jordan pretended that she would come back.

But she knew better. That’s the point of pretending.

Jordan goes back to her game and doesn't think about bad men and Mama One anymore. Or at least, she pretends not to.

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"Hat Man." Jordan stands next to his chair.

"Hm?"

But he isn't looking at her, so Jordan grabs his stick and pokes him with the bird head. It's a very heavy stick, and she drops it more than putting it down; it hits his leg and clatters loudly to the floor. Now he's glaring at her like one of those bad men. Is he a bad man? Jordan doesn't think that Mama Two would leave her with a bad man, but maybe she would. People, Jordan knows, don't always do what they say they're going to do. When Mamas say they'll be right here, baby, no matter what, they don't mean no matter what—not really.

Maybe he doesn't want to see her game. Jordan starts to go back to flop on the bed. But he says, "What?"

When he bends to pick up his stick, Jordan sees that he's looking at her and is satisfied. She holds up her hands with the socks on them and, with much growling, has the two hands fight to pull off each other's sock until the victor is finally crowned. Holding the losing sock, Jordan pumps the winning fist high in the air and adds sound effects, just in case he doesn't get it.

Hat Man doesn't say anything, but his eyebrows don't like her game.

Jordan drops her hand, sits on the floor, and feels a tremendous urge to cry. She wants Mama Two to come back. She wants Mama *One* to come back.

"That would work better if you had two people fighting."

Jordan sniffles and looks up. Hat Man scoots his chair back, leans on his stick, and awkwardly levers himself down to sit on the floor next to her. He still has his gloves on, like he did last night, even though he said he wasn't cold.

Gloves would be better than socks, Jordan thinks. She reaches out with the hand that still has a sock on and makes as if to snap at his glove, asking the best way she knows how, but he pulls his hand back into a fist against his chest.

"No," he says. Not angry, exactly, but firm and final.

Okay, then. Thinking of all the frog words she can use to say this, Jordan tells him, "Good with...people, more people...eyes." She points from her eyes to the socks in hopes that it makes more sense.

Hat Man leans back against the leg of the desk. Maybe she should start calling him Gloves Man instead. "With people watching?"

“Watch, watch, yes, watching,” says Jordan, bouncing. She’s learning so many new words today!

Hat Man, or Gloves Man, or whatever his name is, raises an eyebrow, and for once, it says exactly the same thing that his voice does. “What for?”

Jordan knows this one. “Money,” she says. Three years of life is enough to teach her that people will pay for anything. Including sock-game tournaments.

Hat/Gloves Man wrestles his face into a smooth expression, but his eyebrows and even his eyes are proud of her. “Tickets and bets, hmm? I might get a Dregs stake in that once you’re up and running.”

Jordan doesn’t quite know what he means, but she shrugs and gives him a sock.

Chapter End Notes

kaz brekker learn to talk to children challenge

Also, I am, as the kids say, promiscuous for comments. (Insert sly reference to that one meme here.)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej prepare to leave Ketterdam, and find each other.

Chapter Notes

Shoutouts, as promised <3

andyoudoctor: I love you so much for all of your comments. The balance to writing Jordan, for me, is definitely to swing between humor and angst without much transition, because that's how little minds work. And YES for Kanej trust!

lilieswho: I promised Kanej and I am delivering. Kaz is becoming a dad, he just doesn't know it yet.

Carla: Thanks for the kind words! I hope you like this chapter, too :D

NoeliaBurgos12: I'm sorry you're having that problem with the website! I hope you see this chapter once it's up :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leave Jordan alone with Kaz for two hours, and she comes back with a tournament to rival the Hellshow, a business plan, and Dregs backing. Inej should have known better.

Jordan's grand plans, however, will have to wait; today they're leaving for Ravka, where she'll have far less success starting a sock-gladiator ring, though she could probably still do it if she tried. She's been chattering incessantly all morning as Inej tries to pack, switching between Suli and Kerch, often midsentence. Inej still can't figure out why she keeps calling Kerch "frog words".

Fionn, who finished packing first, has earned the grand honor of keeping Jordan busy while their captain now gets everything in order to depart. Inej eyes them from her position at the bow of the ship; while she can't stop Fionn from teaching Jordan new swear words (in Kerch *and* Kaelish), she can at least ensure that Jordan makes it onto the *Wraith* in one piece.

With a proper pirate's hat that she'd acquired at their very first port stop perched on her head, dressed again in a billowy blouse, this time purple, and a deck beneath her feet, Inej

somehow feels back at home. She is in command here. Hiding is the opposite of what her crew needs her to do as she directs them here and there.

Kaz isn't here yet. Inej is not surprised. He'll make his entrance when he's ready.

(Or maybe he won't come at all.)

"No, move that belowdecks!" Inej shouts. Shouting takes focus, which automatically precludes thinking about Kaz. About Kaz and how she feels unmoored with him again, blind to the parts of him she can't reach and shut out of what he really means. She could never get a read on him, but this is different, worse. She doesn't want to start over.

Apparently shouting doesn't require as much focus as she wants it to.

Moreover, *not* shouting allows her to hear a click against the boards behind her. Ink and coffee reach her nose, mingling with the fish and sweat and salt. It's a heady thing, and Inej remembers the pull of longing again. She remembers what it's like to want what's closed away from her.

"You came," she says, after a delay that she would hope he doesn't notice, except that of course he notices everything. Too late, she realizes how revealing the statement is in itself.

"You thought I wouldn't?" Kaz muses, leaning against the rail, where Inej joins him. He is limned by the morning sunlight, waves rippling in his dark eyes, so sharp-edged as to be geometric in profile. Inej feels the bizarre desire well up to soften all of his lines, to fluff the shoulders of his coat, to ruffle his hair, to see him smile. The world might very well stop for that.

"I didn't know," Inej hedges. This conversation feels achingly familiar, but she remembers what he said last time.

"I did," says Kaz, and it's as simple as an *I will always come* , all by itself. *I will set the world on fire if it stops me* , is written in invisible ink. Inej would think she's looking too much into it, but she can so rarely read him that the words are like he said them out loud.

They're on the side of the ship that faces not the open harbor, but Ketterdam. Their city. At least they will both feel unmoored to leave it. Inej can't go so far as to say that her memories are all or even mostly fond, but like a scavenger, she scrounged her armor from the alleys of Ketterdam and banged it together in the fire of her own creation. At least she has it to thank for that, if not for the necessity of armor in the first place.

"I should have known better," Inej murmurs.

Kaz doesn't say anything, but his silent agreement is clear. If he disagreed, he'd be saying something. Finally, however, and surprising her by it, he says, "As should I."

Inej turns, leaning one hip against the railing, and asks him, "About what?"

Two members of her crew carry a coil of rope past them. Voices rise and fall, carried away by the sea. The wind ripples through her hair and sings into the silence. She's reminded,

unprompted, of the softness of his touch, times she can count on one hand.

Is it too much to press him? They both know. But in this unsteady space, Inej feels stronger, maybe even strong enough to ask for what she deserves. What he has to give her if he wants her. Never something for nothing.

“Jordan.” He says the name carefully, like he’s afraid it’ll summon something, like a child trying out a new swear and fearing to be caught by his parents. “I...It was a bad call. To question you. Despite my best efforts, you’re not a liar.”

The shadow of a smile touches Inej’s lips. “Thank you. And thank you for taking care of her. Jordan likes you, you know.”

Kaz flexes his wrists against the railing, staring down into the harbor like he expects some sea monster to rise from it. “Again, despite my best efforts.”

Inej rocks towards him, still leaving him some space. “I’m not sure I believe that.”

“Because, despite your best efforts, I *am* a liar,” Kaz concurs, almost teasingly. He looks back at her, and his eyes seem like pieces of amber now, trapping the sunlight.

“My parents will be far too excited to get to know you,” says Inej, changing the subject rather more clumsily than she would’ve liked. She feels set adrift in a different way now.

Kaz’s eyebrows lift, but he doesn’t comment. “Have you told them I’m coming?”

“A letter wouldn’t reach them before we do,” Inej says, finding her footing in the safety of the mundane.

“So you haven’t told them about Jordan either.” With a click of his cane, Kaz steps away from the railing back towards the bow, where Fionn and Jordan are on the dock below. Inej joins him, perching on the side of the ship.

Jordan has socks on her hands again; well, only on one hand, as she’s somehow talked Fionn into donning the other one (and is dominating the Kaelish girl at the “sock game”). Inej shudders to think of the words Jordan is learning every time Fionn loses.

“She looks happy,” says Inej. “She’s a happy girl. Despite everything.”

Kaz’s eyes darken to a glare and there’s a black bite in his voice when he says, “She’s too young to understand. She’ll be paying later.”

“That doesn’t mean she can’t fight her way back from it.” Inej closes her eyes briefly—how naive and cloying and childish. But she’s not going to run from it now. She sets her hand down on the railing beside her, slightly more towards him than would be natural, her pinky parted just a bit further from the other fingers.

His eyes are as dark and cold as the harbor. It’s something akin to what Jesper calls “scheming face”, but instead of fixing somewhere in the distance, his gaze is focused on her.

His hands seem to stay folded behind him, out of Inej's view; she sighs and looks back down at Jordan and Fionn. She should have tried harder to take his advice, to battle back her hope. It only got her here.

Bare skin brushes against her finger.

Inej's head jerks up, and she looks at Kaz; he's stiff, staring straight ahead, but his hand lies on the railing beside hers, his glove clutched in his other fist. He brings their little fingers to touch again, and she sees a shudder ripple through him, but he doesn't pull his hand away.

Inej wants to take his hand like she did before, to squeeze it tight and feel the solid reality of him, her anchor. If this is all he can do now, though, she will accept it; it's never been about what he can do, for her, as long as he is doing all that he can. Not all that he will; that's the difference. It would never be enough as long as he didn't try for her, as long as *all he had* meant *all that he had a backup for.* All that he could recover from. All that he could live to lose. She wasn't about to be collateral damage.

It's like the Saints' fable of the poor woman who only offered a few measly coins, but was smiled upon because it was all that she had. Inej will have to tell it to him sometime.

"This is all that I want," she says, brushing her finger up and down against the side of his. He's still gripping the rail hard, but she knows he'll pull away if he has to.

"Is it?" Kaz asks, staring into the sky.

"If it's all you have," Inej replies. "Of course I want more. I want…" *I want you.* The words are as stunted in her mind as they were from his mouth. "I want you without armor. If I'm going to open myself to you, I expect the same."

Kaz twines his finger with hers, his eyes on their now joined hands. The harbor speaks with the voice of a lost home and a lost brother. The wind whispers of what has been found.

Chapter End Notes

It's taking some work to build back to where they were at the end of Crooked Kingdom, but they have a stronger foundation now, which makes all the difference.

Also, ideas for future chapters are more than welcome! My outline for this thing is 107 chapters and I'm not afraid to add more.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz encounters someone who refuses to be afraid of him. The *Wraith* encounters trouble.

Chapter Notes

Shoutouts~

andyoudoctor, my lovely dependable reader, thank you for your comment! Meeting Inej's parents will indeed by interesting. I'm proud of these kids and proud of you :D

demandsomethinganyway, yes indeed, Jordan is winning all of us over. And Kaz is doing his best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything is different from the *Ferolind* , except for what is the same. For instance, the two days Kaz has spent trying to think of a reason to talk to Inej.

The most they've exchanged is a casual conversation in the two days since they left Ketterdam, and it's so quiet here; if Kaz were still in the city, there would have at least been a brawl or two to clean up by now. He can't stop himself from worrying about what's going on in his absence, and if his people can handle it. But instead of memorizing sums and figures, watching the regulars of the Crow Club, or testing out new tactics to draw in business, he has been demoted from feared gang leader to babysitter.

Like now.

He sits with his back against the mast and his bad leg propped up on a coil of rope, his cane resting across his lap to keep it out of little hands. Jordan is not one to be stopped by things being too big for her. Kaz has a good idea of where she's learned that kind of determination.

She's hunted down the coat that he discarded after mere minutes beneath the beating sun and, despite the fact that it must be too hot for her as well, she is currently draped stubbornly in it. As much as Kaz admires her penchant for stealing things, and her ambition for the toughest target, he does wish that she'd stop targeting him. It's frustrating for the both of them, since no one, not even Inej, could make him let this kid win. Going soft on her won't teach her anything.

He stares at her. Doesn't glare at her. It might *look* like glaring, but if it scares her, she might just have to suck it up.

She continues parading around in his coat.

Kaz sighs and—well, even though what he's doing feels a lot like giving in, he *isn't* , because he does not give in. Not this easily. Not to three-year-olds. "What are you doing?"

Jordan turns as if she's just noticed him, as if she hasn't been carefully trying to get his attention this whole time, and raises an imperious eyebrow. Well, one and a half. She hasn't quite mastered the trick of raising only the one.

Kaz returns the look, much more successfully. But he is *not* competing with a three-year-old. He's better than the kind of person who feels satisfaction in triumph over a toddler. Better, as in he has bigger fish to fry.

She pouts. Predictably.

Not his problem if she isn't going to talk. He'll just keep sitting here. Not worrying about what's happening to the Dregs without his reputation around to protect them. Hopefully the threat of what he'll do when he gets back is enough—no, *not* hopefully, because as established, he isn't worrying.

That does not explain why he slits his eyes against the sun, nor the headache that's burrowing in between his eyes. Though that could also be because he's not sleeping any more here than he did in Ketterdam.

Jordan toddles over to stand in front of him, eyeing his cane. Kaz tightens his grip on it. She seems undeterred.

Naturally.

"Kaz," she says, although she stumbles and hisses through the 'Z' sound so that it sputters to a disappointing conclusion.

"So now you know my name," he replies.

"My name," she corrects.

Kaz sighs heavily. This seems to annoy Jordan as it annoys most other people.

"Me Kaz," she insists.

Ah. The coat makes sense now. And the strut, although he's never walked like that, even before he broke his leg. But he's not something to be playing at; not something anyone who's sane and whole should want to become. Certainly not her.

Certainly not someone named Jordan.

He reaches out and plucks his coat back, making her fuss, but she'll get over it. Maybe one day she'll even figure out why, if she remembers this.

He's not sure why he keeps thinking of what he'll teach her or how he'll influence her, as if he's going to be around as she grows. He's third in line at the very least—Inej has taken Jordan in, not him, and the plan is to leave the child with her new grandparents, where she'll be safe. He may hardly know her after this.

And he can't be, wouldn't be, *shouldn't* be thinking of raising her *with* Inej. He's in no position to presume as such. And when did he start making plans beyond what he can control and confirm?

A shadow shifts on the deck before him; it's Inej, descending from her perch to walk among them. Ah, the Sankta of the Sea deigns to associate with mere mortals. One of many reasons she is the only Saint he believes in.

There is a new confidence about her now, here; her braid is loose over her shoulder instead of coiled at her neck, stray wisps fluttering free and brushing her sun-goldened cheeks. Her clothes are looser, too, as is her stride; she speaks louder—speaks more, at that. She is as at home here as on a roof, but in a completely different way, like the difference between the shadows she hid in for him and the sunlight that reveals her as beholden to no one.

Jordan has been sitting and scowling up until now; maybe she's watching Inej, too, though Kaz doubts it. Also, 'too' implies that he was watching her, which. He might admit it in some other life, but not this one.

"You Kaz," says Jordan, pulling his focus back to her. She's contemplative, curious, her head tilted to one side in a way that's untraceably familiar.

Kaz nods.

"No me, me no Kaz," she says. She's looking to him for approval. She should learn not to do that, either.

But he nods again.

"I be...Jordan," she says, suddenly still, her eyes intent on his. They are not the eyes of a child, barely more than a baby.

Kaz swallows through the thickness in his throat. "Be...you."

She doesn't understand the difference, of course.

<><><>

As Kaz watches Jordan, who's calmer now, toddle around on the deck, one of Inej's crew—Kerch, with a ragged ponytail and Shu-style dual swords strapped to her back—calls that she's spotted a ship.

Inej trots over to the girl's side, and Kaz uses his cane to lever himself to his feet; previously just a speck like an grease spot on the horizon, now the shape of what's clearly another ship is making for them. It's a larger vessel than the *Wraith* , lighter in color, flying no nation's flag. But there's a change in the air, as if the wind has turned, that tells Kaz that this crew knows it. They've seen this ship before.

Leaving Jordan by the mast, he limps up to join Inej and the Kerch girl. He wants to know what's about to happen, even if no one is going to tell him. He may not be in charge here, but he's not going to be completely adrift in the middle of a fight if he has anything to say about it.

"This won't be a cannon fight, will it?" asks the girl with the Shu swords.

Inej tilts her head without quite shaking it. "They won't bother. And we're not as heavily armed."

Reading between the lines, the girl with the swords grimaces. "They're going to board."

"We could outrun them," Specht suggests from further down the deck. "We're smaller, lighter."

A suitable strategy for a ship named the *Wraith,* but not an effective one. Maybe for a new enemy, but not when they're being hunted. Just as Kaz is about to voice this—

"No," Inej responds, her tone strong and clear. "This is personal. They won't give up on chasing us."

Kaz keeps looking straight ahead, over the waves, at the spot on the horizon that's now more of a splatter. So he'd suspected. "You know that ship," he murmurs, rough and rocky.

Inej turns her head only slightly towards him. Just as soft, but piercing, she says, "That's the ship we took Jordan from."

"How?" asks the Kaelish girl, Fionn, from her position up near the figurehead. "We took all the girls off of that ship and a fair number of their crew. How's it still sailing?"

Inej rolls her shoulders back. The sun is behind her, her lashes lowering to half-lid her eyes, black in profile. Kaz is struck by the terrifying thought that, more than anything, she looks like *him.*

"Because we didn't sink it last time," she says.

Chapter End Notes

I am now taking suggestions for the names of Inej's parents. Fire away, friends! I am also taking suggestions for future chapters, comments, general Kanej-related screaming,

and anything else you feel compelled to say.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz learns to take orders—the hard way.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, lovely readers, for your comments~

andyoudoctor: Love you and your comments so much! I am definitely rooting for this family, even though they're taking their own time. This fic isn't slow burn found family for nothing.

demandsomethinganyway: Here's your power couple! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was right. They're boarding. The *Wraith's* usual strategies, so much as he knows them, won't do much when they're on the defensive and in full daylight. Inej's eyes are on him and on fire. "Get Jordan to my cabin," she says. "They're here for her."

Kaz is too used to crisis situations to ask, why him. Or, is that the best place. He can wonder all he likes as he limps in long strides over to Jordan, wraps her in his discarded coat, and after a moment's hesitation, scoops her into the arm that's not holding his cane.

There's plenty of fabric between the two of them, and it's a short walk down the hall to Inej's cabin, but nonetheless he puts her down as soon as he can. She's fussing again, her face twisting with confusion and the onset of tears, but he's not here to play nursemaid, so he drops her on the bed and slips out, double-bolting the door.

Inej pokes her head into the hallway's opening, harriedly sweeping loose strands of hair away from her face. "Jordan? Is she—"

Kaz flicks his eyes towards the door.

Inej takes in the bolts and his readied stance with the quickness that always served her so well on jobs, then gives him a curt nod. "Stay here. Defend this hallway."

Kaz gives her a nod of his own, though he's rather more smug about it. "Captain Ghafa."

Inej rolls her eyes briefly. "Learn to take orders, Kaz. I know you'll fight for her."

He re-adjusts his grip on his cane. The shouts are getting louder now; she'll have to go. "Why's that? Why should I care?"

"Because Captain Ghafa said so." Inej slips back out of the doorway and out of his vision.

If he had the time, he would've disagreed; he'll care because *Inej* said so.

The slavers who are storming the hallway probably don't care to listen.

Kaz gets their first try out of the way easy with a swing of his cane; back of the knees, front of the head, out cold. He can't tell how they're doing out on the deck, if they could be fighting harder or if this is the result of sheer numbers. Doesn't matter why when the outcome is still the same and he's got to handle them.

Another of the slavers, taller than Kaz with a red bandanna around his bald head, lunges at him, but he's uncoordinated. Kaz side-steps and flings around to the back, slipping the bandana around the man's neck and pulling it tight while the slaver sputters. He pretends that these are the men who captured Inej. His heart is pumping hot rage.

Two down, more coming. They're pitiful next to what the Barrel has to offer, at least for now. The "for now" comes true when a shorter one draws a sword, and Kaz curses under his breath. He doesn't have time for luck now, and the hall is narrow, and there are three of them on him.

One, he flicks his cane with enough spin to fracture a wrist and the opposite ankle. The pile of sweat and fish-stench stumbles and goes for his throat, but Kaz has an elbow to the face waiting to blur his vision and set his head spinning. The one with the sword is at the back and the blond one's coming at him. Another punch because the first one, the smelly one, doesn't know when to stop and the right hit under the nose will get him out of the way if not dead.

All right, he's tired of defense. Two on one. There's still the problem of the sword, but Kaz is sizing the string bean of a kid up as an ineffectual coward, so he goes for the burly blond one. A well-aimed knee and the slaver's squealing like a pig; then they're on the floor, and Kaz may not be able to grab anything convenient in this hallway, but a fist is as good to bash into a stupid expression as anything. That, and the head of his cane to the windpipe, if he can find it in the man's lump of a neck.

He later blames one specific moment, as usual.

In all of his choking and flailing, the blond slaver scrabbles frantically, clawing at Kaz's sleeve; somewhere in the course of it all, he grab's Kaz's wrist, between white cuff and black glove. Bare skin. A bare chance.

He doesn't know how he wasn't expecting it, but he wasn't, and it makes the bile rising in his throat so much worse. The ship is rocking, and the harbor is swallowing him, and he's failing to protect Jordan—Jordie—but wasn't Jordie supposed to protect *him,* who's the failure now —

Of all things, it's a hot blade of pain down his back that brings him back to the ship and the man who's dying beneath him. Kaz yanks his arm away, leaving tracks from the man's fingernails, and whirls; the one with the sword has finally come into the fight.

"Took you long enough," Kaz pants, tugging down his rumpled sleeve and giving the strangled slaver a kick with his good leg. He can feel blood running down his back and it'll start stinging in a minute, but pain is more normal for him than not.

The kid hesitates long enough before the bodies of his compatriots to let Kaz make several calculations and one decision. Small hallway; no one else coming; better chance of winning when he's brought a cane to a sword fight if they're not in such close quarters. Dodge, feint, and a whack for good measure, and now they're out in the chaos of the main deck.

Kaz doesn't look for Inej. Does not. He's not giving into his tell if he can be aware of it. The girl with the dual swords swings by and steals his opponent, taking one slaver with each hand. Kaz is some mixture of impressed and annoyed.

Gunshots. Kaz's ears find them, and then his eyes do: one of the weaker-looking slavers, probably better armed for it. Nobody's screamed or fallen, so he must have missed, but Kaz doesn't feel like taking chances.

He scans the deck, and *there's* Inej: dancing along the railing like it's a high wire, managing her crew and her fight, emitting what seem like glints of silver at this distance. She grabs hold of a loose rope and leaps into an arc, kicking his mind into gear; Kaz flicks a signal to her. Just as soon as she's close enough to see it, but not so far that their enemies will guess, he bends and cups his hands at his knee, bracing himself for the weight when her heel sinks into his palms.

She springs off into a pivot and a fierce kick, almost too fast for Kaz's eyes to follow except that he sees the damage. He sees her land, get the gun between her curved knives, and then between her swinging towards him and him fighting towards her, she hands it off.

He's not as good of a shot as Jesper, but for someone who's not a Fabrikator, he isn't half bad. Certainly good enough at this range. He's got plenty of anger still and pain to fuel it, so if his shots kill that's not his problem.

One of them is too shocked at the bodies of his crewmates for the profession he's chosen. He's angry, but anger is like wine; it gets better with age, and in that arena Kaz wins. He's not afraid to be vicious—not afraid, like he told his would-be assassin, to hit where it hurts.

"What kind of man fights for your *captain?* " the man spits. "She tired of pleasing men and decided to murder them."

New rage works as well on a foundation of the old. Kaz has heard of people seeing red when they're furious, but his vision goes black; he grazes the stubborn slaver with a bullet, then flips him onto his back with cold satisfaction, sliding the gun over him until it comes to rest above his heart.

The man, who looks young, but maybe it's just because of his fragile expression, whimpers. Of course his bravado's gone. Too bad Kaz can't call Inej over here to kill him herself.

Kaz puts the gun like a finger to the slaver's lips. "Shh, now."

The man jerks his head. "What... *are* you?" he says. He's trying to sound disgusted, but Kaz hears his horror. In that other life he thinks of too much these days, he might have felt some guilt.

"I'm what hides under the monster's bed," Kaz croons, gripping the man's face with one gloved hand and pulling the trigger. Too bad he won't get to hear the second half of the line. "Someone has to do it."

Things have quieted down, he realizes; he pushes himself up on his cane and looks around, and two of Inej's crew members are dragging men out of the hallway to the cabin. Whether they're dead or unconscious, Kaz can't tell and doesn't care.

His eyes sweep across the deck and stop on Inej, who's striding towards him, but there is anger in her eyes. The pain of the slash to his back is starting to settle in now.

"I told you to stay back there," Inej says, her voice low.

He looks at her, perhaps more coldly than he means to. "Nobody else was coming into the hall. He was coming at me with a sword. My chances were better out of close quarters."

"You're used to being in charge," Inej says. "You might have teased about it earlier, but I *am* in charge on this ship, Kaz."

He straightens and lifts his chin. "I was making educated decisions in a fight."

Inej pushes her hair out of her face with more force than strictly necessary. "I was trusting you to protect Jordan, Kaz. I watched you go ten on one with the Dregs. Don't tell me you couldn't have handled it."

Maybe he's planning to say something, maybe he isn't. He doesn't have time to decide.

"You're on my ship," she says. "But that shouldn't even matter when I tell you to protect Jordan."

The anger he has left from the fight is half-quenched, half-rekindled, and there's a sick kind of confusion swirling in its place.

But—as he limps belowdecks to attempt to bandage his back—there's also the question: "When I tell you to protect Jordan", she'd said. Like she, too, against her better conscience, was imagining that he would be in Jordan's life. That they would protect her again. Maybe even together.

Chapter End Notes

I am continuing to take suggestions for the names of Inej's parents, as well as any other thoughts that are swirling about in your little gremlin brains. Or beautiful Shakespearean ones. How am I to know?

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej can help him. And she does.

Chapter Notes

I posted a new fic today; it's a one-shot circus AU that you can check out on my profile if you're interested.

Now, shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, my phone auto-fills your username, and I don't know how to feel about that. The issue between Kaz and Inej is definitely a complex one, but they're invested in conquering it now.

demandsomethinganyway, it's always worth the cost. Also, who wouldn't be in love with dual swords girl?

lilieswho, woo fellow libra! Thanks for the suggestion, and yes, Kaz really does need to learn to take orders. He will, because Inej is worth it to him. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan is safe, but Kaz is not. And not in a Inej-is-going-to-hurt-him way, though she had been considering it a moment ago.

When Inej had burst into her cabin, Jordan was sitting on the bed—crying, but unhurt. Inej knelt next to her and wrapped the little girl in her arms, pressing a kiss to her fuzz of black hair and feeling her own shoulders relax as Jordan calmed.

"You're safe," she'd whispered, pulling back to cup Jordan's face. "You're safe?"

Jordan's eyes were round with fear, but she'd nodded.

Now Jordan is with Specht, as his rough hands dry her tears better than Inej ever would have thought they could, which leaves Inej free to investigate belowdecks.

When Kaz had turned to leave, after she chastised him for abandoning Jordan—and fear and irritation still mingle somewhere in her—she'd seen the red stripe across his back, muted

through the slate gray of his vest, but not hidden as it would have been under his coat, back in Ketterdam. Maybe he'd forgotten, but Kaz was never the kind to forget.

She's not sure why he would have meant to show her, however. It's even less like him to make a bid for pity; he hides pain of any kind, he always does. And Inej understands, because given the choice, so does she. They both have learned to never stop fighting.

And no matter how broken we were…

She can't hear the words any other way but in his voice, like they're scraping the edges to escape his throat before he can regret them. She never regrets them. She hears them too often.

I would come for you, he said .

I can help you, they had both said, and made good on it.

Now is her chance to return the gesture.

If you ever cared for me at all, don't follow.

She hasn't learned her lesson in that regard, nor does she plan to. She might still be annoyed, angry even, but Kaz doesn't deserve her pettiness. Neither does she. She owes it to herself to be better than that.

Soft steps carry her down a ladder that must be uncomfortable for Kaz to navigate, even though he's too proud to say so. What serves as his cabin is something more like a closet—she could say it's his fault, since he bought the ship, but it seems ungrateful and besides, he can figure it out for himself. It's funnier that way.

She doesn't hesitate, because that has never been a wise choice in her life once she's decided on a course of action. Instead, she knocks.

There is no answer. But the silence, where before there was shifting and breathing and the rustle of fabric, is an answer all its own. So she opens the door.

Kaz is facing her, sitting on an upturned crate, his back to the crooked, clouded mirror tacked up behind him. Inej does not like that she notices the bloody gash in his reflection somewhere after his lack of shirt.

He gives her a quizzical look—not embarrassed, certainly. Almost challenging. Almost a veneer for just how vulnerable he is right now: not even that he's wounded, but the amount of skin that's exposed, how she could incapacitate him with a touch. His gloves sit beside him and his cane lies on his other side.

She'd wanted him without armor. Does she want it like this?

"I can help you," she says.

It sounds like fake silks and white tiles. They're always doing the same thing, aren't they?

Kaz seems to think this, too. He winds the roll of bandages back and forth around one hand—one *bare* hand, that Inej keeps looking at; besides the strangeness of it, he has nice hands, which is not what she needs to be thinking about right now—and says, “That sounds familiar.” He’s not joking quite right. She can see the tension in the muscles over his shoulders. She can see it *really well.*

She takes a step forward; such a tiny space, a step is all it takes to reach him. If only he really were that close. His knees are nearly brushing against her thighs. If she bent her head now, they could be kissing. She lifts the roll of bandages from his hands with such delicate fingers as to not even brush against his palms, and says in almost a whisper, “Turn around.”

He...does. He shifts and, with the barest grunt, turns his back to her. She can see his face in the mirror—his hair, no longer neatly pushed back, falling over his forehead; the wariness in his eyes, as if he’s ready to run. She sees her face, too, and is surprised to find the same caution there.

The cut isn’t deep, but it’s a long slice; they could try to trust that it’ll heal on its own, but Inej isn’t sure that she likes those odds. Jesper might not even like those odds, which is saying something.

“It needs stitches,” Kaz guesses. He’s still staring into her reflection.

“You can’t do it yourself,” Inej replies. There’s no way he can reach, even with the mirror’s aid to see.

She can see the thoughts running through his quick mind; balancing what’s worth it and what isn’t. He’s treating this like a business decision, like a wager, like a deal. And maybe, to Kaz, that’s all it is. It must be easier to make every decision as if only logic is involved.

“Do it,” he says quickly, quietly. They’re still speaking in near-whispers—for the same reason, Inej thinks, that people whisper in a church. There’s a reverence about this, about what they have. They are perhaps the least likely people to build something holy, but right now, Inej feels as if they’re standing on a precipice of sacred ground. It could all fall away, but it’s blessed right here.

“I need to get my kit, but I don’t have anything to give you for the pain,” she murmurs, setting the bandages beside him.

Kaz doesn’t answer as she leaves. The pain isn’t what either one of them is worried about.

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When she returns, Inej focuses more than she needs to on the minute tasks of preparation—needle, thread, cleaning her tools, cleaning the cut. She thinks she sees something in Kaz’s face twitch at the cold and the sting, but they’re both too used to this to react much. They’re both too used to this, period. Inej isn’t yet nineteen and she feels old. She feels the way the grandparents in the caravan must have when they made friendly wagers on who would be the first to die. Back then, she’d thought it was morbid. Now she knows better.

She's put it off as long as she can; everything is ready now. Everything but them.

"I'm—" she says, still whispering, "I'm starting now."

Kaz doesn't speak, but she sees his shoulders rise and fall with an unsteady breath. She doesn't know if that's what makes her think of it, but she's not sure what else would.

"What if...I wear your gloves?"

His eyes move up to meet hers in the mirror; he lifts his head. He's waiting.

Go on. Finish the story.

Slowly, but not hesitantly—even paced—Inej picks up Kaz's gloves from where they sit beside him. They're big for her hands, but, she realizes, he's cut little slits into the fingertips for better contact with cards and coins. They're still warm from his hands.

Kaz is still watching her intently, warily, not having said a word. His armor is quite literally in her hands now. Inej has a flash of feeling what it's like to be safe like this, and only like this. Somehow it's...scarier.

It's harder to pick up and hold the tiny tools this way, but the gloves are thinner than they look; it takes her a try or two, but then she's got it, fingers pressed right up against the slits. She puts one gloved hand to his back to steady her approach; his breath catches uneasily, but evens out.

"How's this?" she asks. Her voice is rough as if from disuse. Or maybe wearing the gloves somehow makes her sound like him.

"Fine. Better." *Better than,* he doesn't say. But she hears it.

Inej still doesn't like the clumsy feeling of this new thickness covering her fingers and wonders how Kaz's hands can still be so agile—picking locks, making coins vanish, working a deck of cards. Even if he's had years of practice, if he can do that, then she can do this. She pinches the needle hard, lining it up with the slit to feel it, and makes the first prick into his skin beside the cut. She glances up and sees him give the barest grimace, but at least he's not moving, which makes her job easier.

Out, back in, and the first stitch is done. Almost without thinking of it, as she works, Inej keeps looking up into the mirror to check Kaz's face; the pain doesn't much show there, nor did she expect it to. Once he catches her, in fact, and almost smirks.

There is, however, only so much one can do when piercing someone's skin, not to mention the limits of the oversized gloves. Every once in a while, she'll pull a stitch tight and hear him hiss through his teeth, or see the muscles in his shoulders knot, if only for a moment before they settle. At least there doesn't seem to be much chance of infection; a miracle with slavers' blades, usually as dirty as their hands.

Bizarrely, Inej feels the urge to giggle at this thought. If only the people calling Kaz by Dirtyhands knew that he probably had the cleanest, softest hands in the city, at least in the

literal sense.

“What’s funny?” Kaz grunts through the tug of another stitch. She sees his fist flex and relax against his knee, and he takes a steadying breath.

“It would take some explaining,” Inej replies, half-murmuring since she’s trying to focus.

She wonders if he’ll ask, but he lapses into silence again. Maybe it’s just as well.

So it’s in silence that she finishes: the creaking of the ship, the sussurating waves, either one of them catching their breath every now and again, in concentration or in pain.

But now he sees her scowl in her reflection, or he’s felt her hands stop. “What is it?”

“I can’t tie it like this,” Inej replies. “And I can’t afford to get it wrong.” The detriment to her delicate work has been something she can cope with up to now, but she’s trying to tie off the loose ends, and they slip through her fingers made clumsy by his gloves.

Once again, she sees him thinking; weighing his options, taking the bet. He doesn’t meet her eyes in the mirror, but he says, “Take them off, then.”

Inej lifts her hands. “You’re sure.”

“What other choice do we have?” Perhaps realizing that it’s not her he’s frustrated with, Kaz flattens his hands against his knees, looking stubbornly at them. “It won’t be different than before.”

“You’ve done this,” Inej half encourages, half infers. “We’ve done this.”

(Their hands, touching on the railing. His lips, shy against her neck.)

He doesn’t reply, but she sees him steel himself—almost feels it. So she slips the gloves off, laying them carefully beside him. Maybe there’s no reason to be so gentle, but for reasons she’s unsure of, she feels honored in a way that he trusted her with them, with himself.

When she picks up the ends of black thread, her fingertips brush his back; she sees his head come up, his eyes go wide, his hands curl at his knees, but he doesn’t tell her to stop. With this, she’s more willing to allow him his pride, if that’s what it is—because she wants this, too.

She knots the ends, not too tight, not too loose. The barest touches here and there are unavoidable; he reacts to them more than he ever did to the pain of the stitches themselves, but it lessens each time. The seconds seem long, but it’s abrupt when they’re over.

Inej steps back.

Kaz shifts and turns around; whether to look at her work in the mirror or to look at her, she’s unsure and somehow doesn’t want to find out.

“Another scar for you,” she says, more hurriedly than she means to.

“I think you’re just determined to mend me,” Kaz replies. He tries to twist to look at his reflection, but winces at the pull.

“I’ve done it, haven’t I?” Inej asks, picking up and folding his shirt with more nonchalance than she feels. “I hope you have something else,” she adds, handing it to him.

He looks at her in a way that Nina does better. *Please, it’s me.*

“Should I leave?” Inej asks, bracing one hand against the doorframe.

“Not as if you have to,” Kaz replies.

Thank you so much for reminding me you haven’t had a shirt on this whole time.

Still, it’s as good as a “please stay” from Kaz, and Inej takes it as such. He stays on the overturned crate he’s been sitting on, and she slips past him to sit on the bed, which is diagonal across the small space in order to fit.

“I have a few minutes,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

See previous comments on suggestions for naming Inej’s parents. I’m here to chat about any other thoughts you may have, as well!

Kaz

Chapter Summary

> They're all starting to get attached. In a quiet moment, Kaz allows for the possibility that he doesn't mind.

Chapter Notes

> More Kanej for you because hey, it's me. We're almost done with this arc of the story and ready to head to Ravka, so enjoy some family feels!
>
> Now, shout-outs~
>
> andyoudoctor: This ship has so many layers and parallels, which is precisely why I love to play with the symbolism.
>
> demandsomethinganyway: Romance doesn't define what they are. I don't even know if there's a word for it—maybe devotion.
>
> Seraphina9305: I'm proud to have made you speechless!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Water is different things to different people, and the ocean just happens to be a massive example of this.

Of the two ships floating side by side—one floating significantly more than the other—it is to the larger an avenger, wrapping the ship in wings of death and luring its empty husk to a grave of silt and salt. The ship fights, but it's already flooding within, dark and drowning from the inside out.

To the smaller ship, the ocean is a mother, cradling it in her arms and gently rocking it to sleep. The little vessel is not yet safe and has much to face, but for now it can rest.

This is also a lesson in analogy.

Aboard the *Wraith,* Kaz watches the slavers' ship sink through a porthole. He feels the tide pulling at him as the ship becomes a barge and he thinks of thoughts that lurk in this sort of silence; he's been jumped unaware by his memories more than by any assailant. Night on a ship is a dangerous place to be when the waves come rushing in.

Inej sits across from him on her bed; they've migrated to her cabin after she retrieved Jordan from Specht and oversaw the restraining of their few prisoners.

("It's a small ship," Kaz had observed, brushing his gloved knuckles over the stolen gun. "Not much room left."

"Not much outside the hold," Inej had agreed, inspecting one of her longer knives. "No room for escapees."

The prisoners, a casual observer might note, had begun moving rather more quickly.)

Now Inej is curled in the upper corner of her bed, against the wall, while Jordan is asleep in her lap, tucked between her chest and her drawn-up knees. As the ship lists with the gentle waves, the lantern overhead swings from side to side, throwing ever-changing pictures of Inej's features into dim, brassy light.

Kaz is reminded of the hypnotists on East Stave, using pendants and pendulums to bend curious pigeons to their will. Even if he believed in their craft—and he does believe it can be done, just not that most of them can do it—he may never understand why anyone would submit themselves to it. He feels out of control of his own mind enough.

And yet, here in his very own illusion—his very own hypnosis—perhaps he's mesmerized all the same. Well, pity points in the superiority game, at least his is real.

Inej runs her fingertips over Jordan's head, such a simple touch—because, for most people, there is such a thing. She and Kaz have talked more today than they have since leaving Ketterdam, if not since she returned altogether, and now the silence is comfortable, unstrained.

Nonetheless, she breaks it. "She looks so peaceful like this."

It's true; looking at Jordan, Kaz wonders if either of them has ever looked that serene. Well, not him—for starters, that would require him to sleep on any predictable basis.

"We thought she was asleep when we found her," Inej goes on, her hand drifting down to rest on Jordan's back as it rises and falls with her small breaths. "Just...curled up on this pile of dirty clothes, burlap sacks."

Kaz shifts his gaze carefully from Jordan to Inej, trying to gauge why she's telling him this. Her lips form the story around a soft smile, and the pang it gives him is easily worse than any aches that Ketterdam's winter might set into his bones. Inevitably, the memories crash over him—of her smile, her laugh, her faint touches, and sick panic constricts his chest. He needs to let go. He needs to let the waves take her. The last time he held on, it ended him like this, and the harbor still won in the end.

But Inej is still telling the story, Jordan's story, that something tells him is at least partway hers, too. And he keeps looking at her, and he holds on. He can't bear to see her drown any more than he could to see her fall.

“When we got down there,” Inej is going on, “she was awake the whole time—she looked at me with these wide eyes, not crying, not even scared. I thought—I don’t know why it reminded me—” She gives a sighing sort of laugh, trying not to disturb Jordan. “I thought of you. That you would have looked at me like that. Or maybe I always just thought that you never would have cried, if you ever were a child.” The corner of her mouth pulls up; she’s teasing, but he still doesn’t know why.

And as to what he was like as a child, she’ll have to ask that of a mother he’s chosen to forget. Another body he gave to the tide.

“I wasn’t,” he says. “I’m the spare parts of a boy sold cheap.”

Inej looks back at Jordan, which seems like a preparation then and an explanation later. “Spare parts don’t have brothers.”

He is a sinking ship, water running in through the holes and out again in words. “Neither do I.” If only because one or the other of those boys didn’t hold on tight enough. If only because this piecemeal man learned too soon to let go.

Inej is silent again, but her hand has fallen still on Jordan’s back. She didn’t expect anything else, but he’s still managed to disappoint her.

That, he can bear. Opening his mouth to say any more would open the dam and he’d lose himself. And maybe it’s better this way, better for her to learn again what she already knows. After this trip, she will leave Jordan in Ravka and they’ll part ways again, perhaps for longer this time. He thinks of that “longer”, and now knows where longing got its name.

But Inej is growing in the sun, turning her face to it, sinking roots where they won’t be ripped loose. He is a bitter, twisted, dead thing, rotting from the inside out; he’ll never have the chance. And he doesn’t want to poison her with the self-destruction of everything that’s kept him awake and alive since he was not yet ten. He had believed before that he could make himself better for her, even that he wanted to, but if the choice is to drown or to burn and set the world on fire, maybe he will turn out to be just as selfish as they all say.

“You know my secrets,” Inej counters, her head tilted. A challenge, maybe. But she only wants it to sound like one, and the plaintive question is one he can’t answer.

“I trade in information,” Kaz responds. “I’d be the worst kind of fool to give mine up.”

It might break me.

That story is the center of all the cracks, the one pin at the heart of every tear in him. Pull it out, and he would fall apart.

“To someone who’d use it against you,” Inej replies.

And she wouldn’t, would she? She captures secrets and keeps them that way. Dead men tell no tales, and neither does the Wraith. Maybe she even deserves to know.

“Don’t go asking for what you deserve,” Kaz says roughly. *You deserve more than this world can give you.*

She turns from him, and he sees her eyes find the sinking ship. He wonders if it makes them think of the same things, or if to her, it’s the body of another conquered enemy. A step closer to what she deserves. She’s silent, but her arms tighten almost imperceptibly around Jordan’s sleeping form.

“You’re getting attached,” he says. He’s saying it to Inej about Jordan, about him. He’s saying it to himself. He’s saying it to the dangerous feeling of all being right in this room that has to be an illusion, because if anyone knows illusions, he does. He’s seen behind the curtain. This is not who they are.

“Maybe I am,” says Inej. She cradles the base of Jordan’s head with one hand and presses a kiss to the little girl’s tuft of black hair. “But I’ll see her again. I’ll see you again.” She looks up and meets his eyes, black to black, the night and the swinging lantern, the pendulum of chance.

Kaz Brekker is mesmerized.

Maybe that’s why he allows the illusion. She’s always had a way of making him believe in magic before.

“You’re seeing me now,” he says. He’s not sure what he means. Maybe here, he doesn’t have to be.

“And it’s worth something,” Inej says.

Jordan blinks open bleary eyes, eyes as dark as the sea. She doesn’t look afraid. She doesn’t cry. She just...looks, right at Kaz.

“And you’re seeing us,” says Inej, shifting Jordan’s weight and trying to shush the little girl back to sleep.

It’s true, Kaz thinks. But he always has been. Once he learned to see her, he never stopped.

He never wanted to.

Maybe this is the beginning of something, of what it means to say *I see you* . Maybe it’s an illusion, or a fire that will leave them all as ash. Maybe Kaz has been taken in by the pendulum, by Jordan’s wide, dark eyes and the light shifting over Inej’s face.

The sea continues to coddle with one hand and kill with the other. The harbor is kept at bay.

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve said for previous chapters, I am still taking suggestions for names of Inej’s parents, as well as future scenes or anything else you’d like to see.
Leave a comment for a shout-out! <3

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan arrives in a new place and decides that grown-ups are very frustrating.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the whole “unrevealed” debacle with the last update. Basically, dumb author was adding the fic to collections and messed up, but it should be fixed now. Also, Jordan wasn’t supposed to have another POV until chapter 25, but she has won me over just as well as Kaz and Inej, so here you go!

You know who else has won me over? You, lovely readers! And with that smooth segue, shout-outs~

PrincessKittyKat52, hey, they have to heal in all the ways that they’re broken. And that goes far beyond the romantic.

andyoudoctor, Kaz is definitely a paradox of arrogant and self-deprecating in the way of someone whose self-worth lies in their abilities. I relate.

lilieswho, eeee LONG COMMENT. The silence is sometimes my favorite part of their relationship, because it says so much.

Jaada_82, yay first comment! I’m glad that you’re rooting for this little family as much as I am <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan likes being on the Small Good Boat. She likes to stand on the deck and turn her face up to the hot sun; she likes to climb in the nets (higher and higher when Mama Two isn’t looking); she likes to talk to Stick Man, Kaz, and steal his coat even though it’s too hot for a coat. She’s learning lots of new frog words from him. Also lots of *fun* frog words from Freckle Girl, words that Mama Two tells her not to say.

However, the big big big blue-green ocean that was everywhere yesterday is a little bit less everywhere today; now, part of the everywhere, under a sky that is too big, is a gray-green-brown smudge. It looks like the place where she met Stick Man, but there aren’t any buildings, even from this far away. Jordan’s memories are few and far between, but she

thinks of yellow grass and spindly bushes and thin, lonely trees. Maybe, if there aren't buildings in this new place, there will be wagons.

She's sitting up on the quarterdeck with Mama Two, looking at the smudge. Mama Two has a spyglass up to her eye; Jordan likes the spyglass, because whenever the person using it turns to the front, their eye looks all big.

"New place?" Jordan asks in Mama One words. Her legs are stuck through the gaps in the railing, swinging over the waves. She likes to kick her bare heels against the hull and feel the spray on her toes.

"You could say that," Mama Two answers. She's wearing her scarf instead of her hat today, and it mostly covers her pretty, shiny hair. This makes Jordan sad. She wants to have hair just like Mama Two when she grows up.

She wonders if Stick Man is sad, too. He looks at Mama Two's hair a lot, so that probably means that he likes it.

Jordan looks over the deck for Stick Man, but she doesn't see him. He's probably belowdecks; he's a pale snowman person, not perfect sunny gold like Jordan and Mama One and Mama Two. The sun doesn't like him, and he doesn't like the sun. He's always dressed all dark and inky, so the shadows probably like him better.

"New place?" Jordan asks again, since Mama Two's first answer made no sense. Grown-ups often say things that make no sense.

"I suppose this particular place will be new to you," says Mama Two, putting the spyglass down and sitting beside Jordan. Jordan leans up against her; Mama Two is small and wiry, not squishy and good for cuddling like Mama One, but her arms are strong and she's warm—probably because the sun is her friend. "It's home to me."

"Home?" asks Jordan, not because she doesn't know the word, but because she thought the Good Small Boat was home. She knows that some people live in buildings, but other people, she thought, just live on boats. Jordan would like to live on a boat. Living in something that never moves would be boring.

"Yes," says Mama Two, turning her face to the green smudge and the big, big, big sky. "It will be your home, soon, too." The wind is getting stronger as the land-smudge gets closer; it lifts little loose pieces of Mama One's hair like playful hands, and her voice seems to sigh into it as she speaks. Jordan wishes her own hair would grow faster.

This is an interesting idea, that people can change homes. Jordan lost her home when the bad men took her away, but she hadn't really thought about getting a new home. Maybe she thought that, just like it was Mama Two's home, the Good Small Boat would be hers.

But Jordan knows that even if grown-ups often make no sense, very small children are most likely to be wrong. And if the sky is far too big, then she is far too small.

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The green smudge was not a smudge anymore, and then it was so big that it almost filled the whole line between ocean and sky. Now they are meeting it, slipping in beside another boat just like they did in the place with all of the smoke and buildings. Jordan stands on her toes and peeks over the railing, though she can barely get her eyes above its top; there are dusty roads and yellow grass and no trees. She wants to get off of the boat and run as fast and as far as her little legs can—which is neither very fast nor very far.

All of the boat people are moving around now. They're picking things up, pulling on ropes, calling to each other in frog words; Mama One is watching, one moment on the quarterdeck, the next in the ropes, the next on the railing. Jordan wishes her legs weren't so little so that she could climb just that high.

Even Stick Man is back on the deck, his hat pulled low over his head, shadowing his eyes. He is friends with the shadows, Jordan knows it. They are the only ones he'll let touch him.

Jordan hops down from the quarterdeck and toddles over to join him. He is too tall. He's just standing, watching the yellow grass get closer and closer. Jordan squints up against the sun to look at his face, but he's not smiling or frowning or anything. He has to be thinking something, but Jordan can't figure out what. It annoys her so that she almost stomps her foot again, but he didn't like it the last time she did that.

Instead, she tentatively questions in frog words, "New...home?"

"For you," he says, not looking at her. His hands are folded over his stick, still covered in his gloves.

"Hands cold?" says Jordan, blinking into the sun. At least she's *trying* to look at him.

He finally peers down at her, arching an eyebrow. The one thing she can understand. "No."

Jordan waits, but he goes back to looking at the grass and the roads and the people carrying boxes. How could people carrying boxes possibly be more interesting than her? Eventually, she does stomp her foot in the best act of rebellion she knows, and continues to stomp away. Grown-ups are lots of words that Freckle Girl would say, but they are also ex-as-per-at- *ing*. Ugh.

<><><>

Mama Two apparently likes Stick Man enough to keep him around, so Jordan will put up with him—especially now that it's just the three of them and their bags. Jordan is tucked into the sling against Mama Two's chest, peeking over the edge, though there's not much to see; just the grass and the dusty road. Between Mama Two's shorter legs and Stick Man's uneven stride, stick in one hand and bag in the other, they keep pace well. It reminds Jordan of how they are the rest of the time, of how they don't talk that much, but they always seem prepared to match one another, to move for the same things. Grown-ups understand so many things without talking. Jordan wonders if she ever will.

They are, however, talking now. "We'll hop a cart soon," says Mama Two. "It won't exactly be comfortable, but it won't be walking." Jordan doesn't know most of the frog words she's

using, but she's just as happy to look around and not worry about whatever confusing thing they're saying now.

"I'd be comforted, if I were ever worried," says Stick Man. "I hiked days to the Ice Court. Seems to me you might remember."

"You hadn't been cut up *again* back then, and it still wasn't pleasant. Believe it or not, I want this trip to be easy, not just doable."

He laughs, but not like something is funny. Jordan is just about to give up on grown-ups. "For both our sakes, want something attainable, will you?" he says.

"Right, I'll do that, but I'll have to start by sending you back to Ketterdam," says Mama Two. There's an odd sharpness to her voice, and an even odder silence follows. Jordan pokes her head further out of the sling to see if she's missed anything, but Stick Man is staring straight ahead, his eyebrows obscured in the shadow of his hat so that she can't even read them.

Mama Two sighs heavily, enough that Jordan moves with the rise and fall of her rib cage. "You've beaten a city to its knees, Kaz, and yet I'm the one of us who can say it."

"I *have* said it," he replies roughly, speaking at last. "And nothing has changed about that."

Jordan twists, trying to see Mama Two's face and figure out what they're talking about, but the sun is in her eyes. Why do they sound all…mad-sad, but happy-scared? Too many things.

"Everything's changed, Kaz," says Mama Two. "I thought you were telling me not to get attached. Do you want to make it harder?"

"You know what I want," says Stick Man, more quickly than he's responded to anything this whole time.

Jordan keeps hearing that word— *want* . She knows what that word means. She wants a lot of things, like pretty hair and longer legs and a knife (or ten) and Mama One and a real home, on a boat or in a building, it doesn't matter. But wanting something isn't the same as having it. It doesn't even mean that you *can* have it. That's why Jordan can want things like Mama One. And a knife.

Right now, she just wants them to *talk.* But they don't; they're quiet all the way until the cart picks them up, and then they rumble down the road, and the bouncing and the rocks make Jordan want to cry. She wonders if grown-ups just stop wanting to cry, or if maybe they know better, even though they're very silly sometimes. She looks around, but now she can't even see yellow grass and lonely trees out the windows. Only dust.

Chapter End Notes

So I think that I've decided to honor canon (and Kaz's POV) by just leaving Inej's parents nameless; I don't want to step into Leigh's shoes TOO much. However, let me know in the comments if it gets awkward.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Inej finds that coming home is not a simple thing. Kaz observes.

Chapter Notes

Good morning, lovely readers! I hope that whatever you're facing today has no idea what it's dealing with, and I'll even throw in a free Kaz glare with the package.

Shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, Yeah, Jordan calls Kerch "frog words" because of the way that the words hop around. And I think she would want a knife regardless of the stress that her semi-parents are putting on her, but they certainly aren't helping.

Wicked333, there will be more. Trust me. That was the end of the prologue; we're just getting into the first arc now.

demandsomethinganyway, I'll pass along your pain to Kanej, but I can't promise that they'll do anything about it, hehe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz isn't going to say that he was grateful for the cart, but that doesn't mean that he wasn't. He'd rather not limp into the house and have Inej's parents' second-first impression of him be one of pity. Then again, gratitude isn't a thing much spoken of in the Barrel; speaking one's thanks is as good as admitting debt. Running a club will teach a man things about debt. For that matter, being fr—allies—coworkers—whatever, *associating* with Jesper will teach a man things about debt. Most places, the person you owe will come and take your things or your livestock as pay, if worse comes to worst. In the Barrel, they'll go straight for your head.

It's an old habit, but the logical part of Kaz (the part that Inej's presence tends to silence) reminds him that it doesn't apply to her; he already owes her more than he can express, let alone repay. Still, in this moment, he retains his pride.

They are unloading their things now, dismounting; Jordan looks around with the eyes of one who still searches for the good in a new place, instead of potential threats or possible routes of escape. It takes some getting used to, though maybe they should just train it out of her. That kind of thinking got her namesake killed.

Kaz sets his cane down first and uses it to lever himself down from the cart. Inej passes one of the bags to him, which he takes in his free hand; he can't quite read her eyes, except for the promise that they'll talk later. He's rather disconcerted to find that the prospect of greeting her parents is a relief in comparison.

Jordan is wriggling and complaining, so Inej sets her down as they walk towards the house, her hand looking big when it grasps Jordan's tiny one. Kaz scans the landscape for reasons unrelated to the tightness in his chest at the sight of them; it's like his few memories of the town near Lij where he left his childhood, though drier, and with seemingly more crops than animals.

They stop at the door.

Kaz raises his eyebrows, inviting Inej to go ahead. It's not lost on him that she has Jordan, and that whichever one of them enters with her will have to face the questions first. He assumes she'll want to.

Inej looks back at him, shifting the bag in her hand as if to remind him that her hands are full. Kaz's are, too, but perhaps just to prove that she could've managed it, he jostles the handle of his own bag onto his gloved palm and opens the door.

(She also could have just let go of Jordan's hand, but he isn't so petty as to point that out.)

(Even if he wanted to be, Inej smiles at him as she goes in, which erases any thoughts of, well, anything else.)

The house smells of herbs; it's so different from the Slat that Kaz's mind takes a moment to adjust. A perfume of sage and jasmine hangs in the air, in the dust that shimmers in bands of sunlight through the windows. A woman that Kaz recognizes to be Inej's mother is sitting at a table, around the corner from the entrance but still visible; as soon as she sees them, however, her face alights with a smile that Kaz finds jarringly familiar. It's Inej's smile, but unafraid in its brightness, unfettered, uncomplicated. He wonders if, had their lives been better, Inej would smile like that. He wonders if he could handle it, if she did.

Inej's mother runs over on light feet that Kaz also recognizes to wrap her daughter in her arms and cling to her, murmuring words in Suli into Inej's ear. She cups Inej's face, runs her fingers through her hair, clasps her hands close; Kaz looks away.

Jordan has stepped back uncertainly from Inej and now stands at his side, though from the looks of her she's a moment away from just sitting on the floor and having done. Has she had a nap today? That's the kind of thing that Inej usually remembers, and technically there's no reason for Kaz to know, especially if things go according to plan. Still.

He feels something brush against his good leg, the side that Jordan's on, and perhaps it's the unexpectedness that makes his whole frame go stiff. He looks down and Jordan has a fistful of the leg of his trousers, her other thumb firmly implanted in her mouth, and for a moment he's annoyed—she's going to stretch the fabric—but then he realizes what she's doing.

Jordan is pulling on the fabric for a reason. She's holding it away from his leg in such a way that her hand doesn't touch him, not even through it.

There's no way she's doing that on purpose.

Even if Inej had told her—and if she did, they'll have to discuss the explanation of his weaknesses to toddlers—what are the odds that she would have remembered?

Some people believe in reincarnation, including certain followers of Inej's Saints. For a ludicrous moment, Kaz wonders.

Still, he knows better. He knows better than to go believing in things, and he knows better than to search for the dead. He knows to let go, otherwise it's both of them being dragged out with the tide.

Kaz hears a shout of delighted surprise that tells him Jordan has been spotted. Still ostensibly ignoring him, Inej's mother kneels and cups the child's face with hands that are just as rough as Inej's, if for very different reasons. The woman calls over her shoulder, more words in Suli, before switching to Kerch for Jordan.

"Beautiful, beautiful," she murmurs, that smile alighting her face again. Kaz wishes that he could do anything to make Inej smile so often.

They're joined through the open doorway by Inej's father, who is shorter than Kaz by enough that it's surprising. It makes sense, but given their relative positions, it feels wrong somehow. Unlike his wife, the older man notices Kaz straightaway.

"So she has convinced you to come." He clasps his hands proudly, but the fact that it's in lieu of shaking Kaz's hand is not lost on anyone, save perhaps for Jordan, who is still in her prospective grandmother's clutches. Nonetheless, he smiles. "Our Inej still has a winning way about her, hm?"

Kaz lifts an eyebrow. He doesn't smile, but he lets the hard lines of his face soften for her sake. "Indeed she does."

Inej *does* smile at that, from her place at her father's side, and Kaz—well, he's not sure what his face is doing, but the warm effervescence of her seems to fill him, soothing even the lingering ache of the cut across his back.

Inej's mother says something in Suli again, looking up at her husband and holding Jordan's hands; what she means is obvious enough from context, not to mention the look on Inej's face. Kaz braces himself for the inevitable questions—not that he hasn't been expecting them this whole trip.

The older man looks up, joy seemingly sun-baked into the lines of his face. "You have finally brought us a grandchild?"

Kaz bristles at *finally,* but the look that Inej shoots him is enough to calm that reflex, at least for now. "In a way," she says hesitantly.

“I told you,” says Inej’s mother, finally rising, in rough Kerch. “I said this man, she loves this man, marry him—”

Inej shifts back into Suli to correct her mother while Kaz stares resolutely at the head of his cane. His conscience may well be on its last breaths, but it does raise a weak finger of objection at his letting Inej handle this alone. What else, he argues, can he do? It’s a matter for family, which he is not.

He’s not sure what Inej is explaining now, but he can at least contribute concerning Jordan. “Inej rescued her,” he explains, mostly to Inej’s father, who seems to be playing the part of interpreter. “The adoption isn’t official yet, but she fits in well.” There’s a roughness in his throat that the years haven’t smoothed, and he feels it more now, in the quiet. “Her name is Jordan.”

Both parents test the name. It suits their tongues, and Jordan looks up, curious, at the sound of it.

Inej steps back to stand at Kaz’s side, her hand dangling mere inches from his. A distance too far.

“She is beautiful,” her father says. “She could be your child.”

Kaz’s face remains impassive, but he feels a tightness in his chest; despite the implications of the man’s words, Kaz sees the aim of his eyes, and understands—more than he wants to—that the *your* is plural.

They break the circle to enter the house proper; it’s one level, simple and neat, not unlike the house in the fragmented memories that are gathering dust in the back of Kaz’s mind. Jordan has released her grip on him, but still walks beside him, constantly poking at things from which he finds himself shooing her away.

“That’s not yours,” he mutters, poking her heel with the tip of his shoe when she reaches out to grab a large vase.

Inej just about snorts. “And that’s ever stopped you, Kaz?”

He sighs heavily and looks back at Jordan, who is clearly not benefitting from these mixed signals. “You might break it,” he amends.

Inej mumbles something that sounds like “Dining room ceiling.”

“You don’t want to be like me anyway,” Kaz huffs, sounding more like a harmless curmudgeon than he has ever wanted to. At least it convinces Jordan to move along and follow her new grandparents into the main room, where a collection of chairs and ottomans awaits them.

He slits his eyes sideways at Inej, but she’s smiling, which puts a stop to any irritated train of thought that he might have. He really needs to get a grip if he’s going to maintain his reputation with her around.

Inej would tell him that he doesn't have to, he thinks as they settle into the late afternoon warmth. There are no witnesses to who he might become here, with Inej in his line of view and Jordan nestled into some kind of puff between them. But change, he thinks as he watches Inej talk to her parents, is a lasting thing.

There's something in their eyes that he both recognizes and feels opposite to—a wanting to love, a fighting to remember how. They begin so excited about the land, the sun, the crops; they tell stories of family and friends who hope to see Inej agin, and of their hopes to reunite with the caravan; but with each tale she returns of a daring midnight rescue, each retelling of a job or a fight, each slip of what her life has been these years, they grow quieter and quieter, seeming at a loss.

Kaz knows that Inej spoke to them when they were first reunited, that her first voyage on the *Wraith* was to take them home, but how much she told them of what she faced alone, he isn't sure. He can gauge from their warm receptions, however, that she has told them very little about him. What parents would welcome a man who gave their daughter base survival, offering her no remedy and scorning her faith? Never mind everything else he has done. He can't afford to let shame overtake him, but that doesn't mean he's not aware of others' perceptions.

The silence stretches. It makes even Kaz uncomfortable.

Jordan has fallen asleep, but she looks up, as if the gap in conversation awakens her where no noise did. Inej, as if grateful for the disturbance turns sharply to her and bends to smooth back Jordan's tuft of dark hair. "Shh," she soothes, murmuring something in Suli, but there's a high set to her shoulders that Kaz doesn't miss.

"Why don't you get settled," says Inej's father, rising abruptly with the grunt that seems to come in every old man's handbook. "You will have some time together this evening, hm?" He forces a jovial smile and hesitates a moment before leaving, his wife shuffling out behind him.

As soon as they're gone, Inej drops her face into her hands. "Saints."

Kaz presses his hands hard against his knees. He'd thought that finding Inej's parents would bring her the kind of joy that he alone could not—and still, selfishly, he savors the memory of the way she'd glowed in the sun, racing down the docks—but who is he to gauge how complicated family can be? How should he know?

"Should we not have come?" he murmurs, his eyes landing on Jordan for a reason that he can't place. She's half asleep again, perhaps proving the theory of blissful ignorance that Kaz has never subscribed to.

Inej sits up straight. "No! I mean, yes, of course we should. It wasn't going to be perfect, Kaz. Family never is." She dangles her arm over the side of the chair, reaching down towards Jordan. "That doesn't mean it's not worth it."

She's doing it again, Kaz thinks. Talking about family as if it's something he's a part of, as if he finally lowered his infamous guard enough to become entangled in all of this with them

unawares. He certainly doesn't feel like it. But then, with Inej, it was never a rush, never something he knew while he was happening. He just looked up and found that he'd fallen.

He's not sure if she's right about all of this, but one certainty pierces anything else. For her, he will stay. He'll fight, because that's what he promised. And people may say what they want about him, but he always keeps his word.

Chapter End Notes

I've tentatively decided to not give Inej's parents names because that feels like getting too much into Leigh's work for me. However, let me know if you think it's awkward. Or, you know, anything else that you want to tell me.

Inej

Chapter Summary

> Kaz, Inej, and Jordan go for a walk. Kaz flirts successfully and surprises, well, everyone.

Chapter Notes

> I'm pretty sure that I tagged this story as family feels, and now you know why. I don't really have a clever segue into the shout-outs, but here we go~
>
> wicked333, It's funny to me that all of you pointed out that remark from Mama Ghafa. Cute and funny though it is, it's also the product of a this-or-that, if/then world where love equals marriage and babies, no question.
>
> andyoudoctor, you know how much I love quotes. Kaz is definitely getting attached, but good luck getting him to admit it.
>
> lilieswho, I love so many of the comments you made that I couldn't pick a specific one! However, what I will say is that Kaz is fighting this relationship because he is just as afraid of having someone helpless, like Jordan, depending on him as he is of depending on someone else. I think that some part of him is afraid that, like Jordie failed him, he'll inevitably fail her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej is stowing away her few things in the guest room her parents had indicated when Kaz joins her. She doesn't bother to turn, instead lifting her head at the sound of his cane on the floors. Each of them always knows when the other is there.

"This is the only one," he says.

Inej fills in the gaps and turns around to face him, sitting on the bed beside Jordan, who is taking a much-needed nap. She waits for him to go on, but, Kaz being Kaz, he doesn't elaborate. It won't be the first nor the last time that she wonders if it's worth waiting for him to offer more, or if she will always have to ask. Then again, in fairness, she doesn't need either just now. She supposes she should have expected there to only be the one room, but with everything happening with Jordan, she'd barely considered it. But what that means for both of them...

“Well, I did only tell them that I was coming,” she reasons, watching him to guage his reaction. His face remains impassive, but she sees his Adam’s apple rise and fall as he swallows, sees his hands tighten on the head of his cane as he grounds himself.

“We can set up a cot,” she says, rising and looking briefly around the sparse room. “If it comes to it, I’ll make a nest out of pillows. I’ve slept on worse.”

That was both the wrong and the right thing to say; while Kaz’s brows draw together angrily, it seems to have distracted him from the oncoming panic.

“What about her?” he says gruffly, tipping his head towards Jordan.

“She’ll share with us,” Inej decides. “For all I know, my parents still have some of my old things...and they’ll need supplies for her anyway.”

She doesn’t know why, but every time one of them brings up the plan to leave Jordan here, Inej feels as if she’s realizing it for the first time, not remembering how it’s supposed to be. For once, it might be worth learning Kaz’s method of letting go.

And yet, when Jordan wakes in the silence, confused and fussing before she realizes where she is, Inej wants nothing more than to be here for every one of these moments. She wants to wrap the little girl, *her* little girl, in her arms and teach her that there is still kindness in the world, but that she has to be ready for the parts that lack it. For now, however, as she pulls Jordan into her lap, she knows she’ll have to savor the time she has left—to take it day by day.

Brick by brick.

The faintest of smiles crosses Inej’s lips. When applied to better things, Kaz’s philosophy isn’t actually a bad one.

“Have I missed a joke?” Kaz asks, arching an eyebrow. He’s seemed distracted, but now his eyes are back on her and Jordan.

“Would you laugh?” Inej parries.

“Think of my reputation, Inej.”

“I don’t think you can laugh, reputation or no.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Do you accept?”

Despite her teasing, or maybe because of it, Kaz doesn’t quite smile, but his mouth curls up at the corners into something treacherously close.

Jordan starts squirming to be put down, which gives Inej an idea. “Are you up for a walk?”

Kaz tilts his head, stoic and serious once more. “What for?”

“The joy of it,” says Inej, raising her eyebrows in a challenge. “Might I introduce you to the concept?”

“Don’t pretend you’ve been so blessed,” says Kaz, his lips thinning, but nonetheless he makes his way back to the door and pushes it open. Jordan finally succeeds in wiggling out of Inej’s lap and toddles over to the door, beating him out over the threshold and grinning in victory.

“You are both determined to compete with me today,” Kaz mutters, shaking his head.

“And maybe with our combined forces we’ll win.” Inej closes the door once the three of them have all made it out and takes Jordan’s hand, ushering her away from the wrong doorway.

Despite her jesting to Kaz, this is a bizarre feeling—to have no reason to do things, to do something more than survive, to have no plan, only ever-shifting desires. She’s struck by the sudden, possibly ridiculous fear that she won’t know what to do when it’s just them, talking—no job to plan, no information to share, no walls to throw herself against like a bird at a window until her strength is gone. What then?

They are two of the most dangerous people in the world, and yet the things that scare them are absurdly harmless. Maybe that’s always how it is.

We’re about to find out.

<><><>

Summer is barely awakening to set the sky to rights, and yet it’s already warm here, Inej reflects. It’s so different from Ketterdam, where she would wear her sleeves long to keep out the chill as much as to hide the remains of the Menagerie tattoo. Inej drinks in the heady, golden perfume of late spring grasses that they stir as they walk, Kaz slightly in front to carve a path with his cane; the look in his eyes is distant, seeing something invisible to her, and she wonders if he, like her, is thinking of his home—wherever that may be.

She remembers walking through these fields with her family. She remembers flattening the grass beneath the wagons' wheels. If she closes her eyes, she’s a girl again, with the sun heavy on her shoulders and her heart pulling her on to run forever. Will the fireflies dance with her now as they would around a campfire, or will she be a stranger to them?

She feels strange. The language has never left her tongue, and her Saints have never left her heart, but they can’t guide her here. And it is not Ravka, not the Suli, not her parents, who have changed; it is her.

Jordan sneezes, pulling Inej back to the present; she smiles softly and scoops up the little girl, settling Jordan on her hip, or what she has of one. Nina could carry Jordan all day, if only she were here. Jordan’s been quiet since she woke up. Inej wonders what she remembers—if she remembers anything.

Kaz has stopped. They’ve ascended a shallow slope to the top of a rise that drops down steeply on the other side, and before them is nothing but land. For miles upon endless miles,

the golden fields roll on, sun-baked under an impossibly wide sky. The horizon is smudged with forest where it climbs into the north, but here there is only a forest of wildflowers and sweet-smelling earth.

Inej looks over at Kaz, where he's watching it all, still silent. His hair isn't so sternly pushed back as usual, nor as rumpled and mussed as it is when he's been running his fingers through it, trying to solve a problem. The soft hands of a breeze lift it as Inej has long wanted to do. He's shed his coat and vest for the sake of a simpler white shirt that almost makes him fit the matching, warm simplicity of the world around them.

"I never thought this would suit you," Inej murmurs.

He looks back at her. "Does it?"

"Would I have said so otherwise?"

Jordan lays her head on Inej's shoulder. "We sun friends now," she says sleepily. "All, all."

Inej gives her an amused smile. "If you say so."

She sees Kaz's shoulders rise and fall on a steadying breath before he finally says, "You believe that you should've come."

"I do." But that's never stopped him from re-hashing things with her.

He makes some attempt to smooth his hair back. Inej is almost sad to see it. "Should I have?" he asks. There's the same tone in his voice as there was right before he first met her parents—the nervousness that reminds her that he's still not much more than a boy. Seventeen or nineteen, sometimes the same things that make you grow up too fast make you miss parts of growing altogether.

"It's not like you to second-guess yourself," Inej says softly, stepping up to his side. The grass rustles around them like unintelligible voices, the only sound for miles.

"Maybe I'm not. But I am consulting you, which is necessary now."

"Only now?"

"Don't beg me for compliments, Inej." But he must not be trying to hide much from her, because he says it in a way to make her think that he's afraid of what he would say if she did.

"I'll beg you for nothing," she says, not angrily, but with a pride that she at last knows she deserves. She raises a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "I don't know whether you should have come. Only the Saints might. But I do know that I want you here."

Kaz stares straight ahead, his eyes the color of oversteeped tea. He looks like he's scheming, Inej thinks, planning what to say to her, piece by careful piece. She almost wishes that he would just say something, for once, instead of burying his true meaning the way that he does.

“We want you here,” Inej adds, shifting Jordan’s weight against her hip. “She likes you.”

“That I will never understand,” says Kaz, the ghost of a humor returning to him as he shifts his gaze back to her.

“It’ll be the first thing that you’re content not to know, then,” says Inej. She sits, settling against the grass, and shifts Jordan onto her lap; Kaz joins her. His silence is comfortable now, not strained and aching like an overworked muscle.

They watch Jordan as she totters around, picking the wildflowers and grabbing at bugs that burst up and buzz away. It shouldn’t pain Inej to see how much Jordan is at home here, but she feels it keenly nonetheless. Somehow, she fears that with Jordan, she’ll have lost a reminder that there are still good things, innocent things, unspoiled souls in this world. Inej spent her time in the Barrel trying to find the good in people who lacked it, and now here is someone at last with nothing to hide.

Jordan patters up to Kaz with a fistful of wildflowers and holds the makeshift bouquet out to him. He raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure those aren’t for Inej?”

Jordan shakes her head stubbornly. “No. You.”

“Me?

“Too much...blehh. Need pretty, some pretty.”

Inej hides a smile behind her hand, only to cover a blush as well when Kaz says, “I’ve got your mother, isn’t that enough?”

Inej sits up a good bit straighter. “Kaz Brekker.” This from the boy who called her an investment? His voice is light, as if they’re still bantering back and forth, but she sees a shade of red creep up his neck from beneath his collar.

“Mama pretty. Flowers pretty,” Jordan insists, clearly oblivious, or maybe just not understanding enough Kerch—though, for all that, she’s on the right track. She all but shoves the wildflowers into Kaz’s gloved hands, and he takes them, perhaps still surprised at himself.

He looks over at Inej and holds up the flowers, presumably asking her if she wants one. She’s not sure why he can’t just ask, since apparently he knows how to use his words now.

“They’re your gift,” she finally says. “Keep them. Besides, I’d rather not upset Jordan.”

Kaz shakes his head. “You couldn’t. She worships the ground you walk on.”

“Says *you* ,” Inej retorts. They’re both much more comfortable in the safer territory of going back and forth, clinging to the familiarity of one another, hiding from what they remember and what is revealed in the sunlight. And maybe she’s wrong; maybe the scent of spring grasses, the heat on their heads, the blue-and-gold world of fields and endless sky—they are only a change to him. Maybe the distance in his eyes speaks of nothing that has gone before. But on the rare occasion that she can read him, Inej isn’t usually wrong.

Maybe they can at least pretend, here, that sunlight on the fields is the only gold they need.

Chapter End Notes

While you're waiting for the next chapter, if you still need a fix of Kanej (or the crows in general), I have some other works if you'd like to check them out!

Catch and Release—immediately post-CK, Kaz and Inej struggle to sit together and learn some things along the way.

renegades in the ring—Circus AU where Kaz is a magician, Inej is an acrobat, Jordie is alive, and everyone is more or less happy.

the ichor in their veins needs feeding—A modern AU that is a collection of snapshots and found family feels.

the willows' lullaby—Kaz and Inej have survived to old age. A series of reflections before the end. Maybe read the circus AU after this one, hehe.

If you'd like to say hi, you can leave a comment here for a shout-out or at any of those other places!

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz gives up a piece of his story.

Chapter Notes

I think I've finally figured out the update schedule for this fic—it'll be Monday/Wednesday/Friday, skipping one each time (so Monday, then Friday, then Wednesday, then Monday again.)
Shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, I also love the one bed trope (and we will get some of that, although much later). And I hope you enjoy them talking in this chapter!

lilieswho, I thought you all deserved some family fluff. Also, I will never shame you for enjoying my work whenever you choose to do so <3

wicked333, I'm glad to see that all of you loved that moment! I did, too, haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz wakes up from *that* nightmare. He hasn't had it in months. Maybe because he's been dreaming of Inej, instead.

He stares at the ceiling with dead eyes, the same dark and empty eyes that are branded onto his mind. If he closes his eyes, shuts out the world, he can almost feel the waves rocking him, coaxing him under.

Here, though, awake, the gray dawn is brushing against his face, weak shafts through the window by his bed. He squints and drags himself into a sitting position, holding one arm up to shield his eyes from the light, dim though it is. He chances a look to the makeshift bed on the floor—it must be early, since Inej is still asleep. That was still the most he's slept in too long.

He takes advantage of the mercy of the early hour to let his eyes linger; the simple night shift that she wears is loose on her, giving only suggestions of her lithe frame in the shadows or thin places struck by the early light. Her eyelashes fan gently over her bronze cheeks, and for that moment, she is not the girl he made her. She is whoever she was here, a picture of a better world.

Jordan, meanwhile, is asleep on a large cushion between them. She's got her thumb firmly implanted in her mouth and shows no sign of waking up soon, which he supposes is a thing to be grateful for.

Kaz rolls his shoulder in the plain cotton shirt he's wearing, easing out the stiffness that he must have gained in dreaming. His leg, though, isn't bad; actually, it's better here than it's been in the cold, wet city in a long time. At least there's one good thing about being here.

He picks up his cane but limps out of the room without it, his eyes catching on Inej before he goes.

Well, two things.

<><><>

Kaz is sitting in the front room, killing time and growing increasingly irritated with the lack of coffee, when Inej comes in.

She's wearing her quilted vest now, her feet bare and her hair loosely plaited over her shoulder, a sleep-warm softness around the edges of her eyes. Kaz is in the middle of vanishing a small, flat stone from a decorative bowl and botches the trick completely, almost dropping the stone altogether.

"What was that supposed to do?" asks Inej, smiling a smile that might well beat the sun to lighting up the sky.

"Exactly what it did," Kaz retorts, half pretending to be insulted.

"I forgot, you don't make mistakes," Inej agrees seriously. "We can go sit, you know. Wait until you try my mother's spiced tea." An almost dreamy mist glazes over her eyes. "I've missed it."

"I can tell," Kaz says quietly, more rough burr than true voice or tone. He leans on his cane and pushes himself up from the chair, softening its clicks as well as he can while he follows Inej into the kitchen.

When they enter, Inej's mother is leaning against the counter, methodically stirring something in a pot. A smile breaks gently over her face, and Kaz thinks again of how easily she smiles.

"Perfect timing," Inej muses, sliding an arm around her mother and receiving a kiss to the cheek in return. Kaz is almost baffled by how the previous day's strain seems forgotten.

"Where is the little one?" Inej's mother asks, her Kerch tentative and thickly accented.

"Still asleep, Mama," Inej replies, extricating herself and carrying the pot to the table. She shifts into Suli to say something longer; based on the way her mother beams with pride, Kaz gathers that it has something to do with the tea. He takes a seat and accepts the offered cup.

Inej holds her own cup only momentarily before she lets go, shaking her hands from the heat. Kaz, for his part, is perfectly content thanks to his gloves and shoots her a smug look. She

rolls her eyes.

In his mind, however, he's trying to approximate the tallies for the Crow Club and the Silver Six. They were both doing well before he left, and there haven't been issues with upstart gangs in the past weeks—Dirtyhands only has to show up to so many skirmishes before people realize that he isn't running his empire from the backseat. Per Haskell did it, Pekka Rollins did it, and now Kaz is sitting on the throne.

(*You'll see who wins in the end,* says Jordie's voice in his head. *You've beaten a city to its knees,* says Inej.)

He isn't about to make the mistakes of the kings he toppled. Not while someone younger and hungrier can always come along.

It isn't exactly that he doesn't believe Anika and Pim and his experienced Dregs can handle things; he's just made his success by taking the smart odds and having back-ups and being one step ahead. Being an ocean away from his city and his sources makes that well-nigh impossible.

"Scheming face," says Inej.

Kaz looks at her inquiringly. The look she returns over the rim of her steaming cup is one of amusement. "What do you have to plan here?"

"What I'll do when I get back," Kaz replies, taking a sip of his tea. Warmth bursts in his mouth, both of temperature and flavor, and floods his core. It's surprisingly pleasant.

"Always so many steps ahead," Inej says, still sounding amused for some reason that he can't fathom.

"That's how I survive," Kaz reminds her.

Inej reaches across the table to him, and he's surprised at how little he hesitates before covering her fingertips with his gloved ones.

"Enjoy not having to," she says softly.

As the morning grows in strength, the tea cools, and the sun streams in through the windows, eventually Inej's father and Jordan join them so that the whole—so that all of them are around the table.

The whole family. That's what he almost called them. He wants to pretend that he didn't, but his thoughts have always been his only honesty.

Jordan is sitting next to Inej, getting her little hands sticky as she stuffs her face with fruit. Her grandmother clicks her tongue and wipes the juice off of Jordan's chin, making Inej laugh. They all look so…happy. Normal. They're willing to do the work for this relationship, Kaz sees. He's seen that reflected in Inej enough to know.

“You are already starting to fit in, young man,” her father comments with a nod to Kaz. He supposes that he does look more like he belongs, dressed in simple linen and cotton, his hair loose instead of sternly pushed back. He could just leave it at that, and yet.

“Some things never quite wear off.”

It’s like when he told Inej that Pekka Rollins killed Jordie; he’s not sure why he says it, but then it’s out and in the ears of those who don’t know how much it means.

“You’ve lived on a farm before?” Inej’s father asks. At least he looks pleased.

“Hidden depths,” Kaz murmurs in assent. He risks a glance at Inej, who is studying him with her dark eyes; he can’t see anything in them that he understands—no anger, no joy, hardly even surprise.

All he sees is the promise that she’ll ask him later.

<><><>

“I wondered,” she says. “When we were in the field yesterday.”

“Have I grown so easy to read?” Kaz asks. Jordan is charming her grandparents in the next room, so he and Inej have the sun-soaked kitchen to themselves, the perfume of herbs and spices heavy in the air. They’ve returned to their earlier position, their fingertips touching, though he hasn’t taken his gloves off yet. He isn’t sure why.

“Only for me,” Inej replies, her index finger drifting back and forth across his in almost a caress. “You looked like you were remembering.”

“And is that similar to scheming?” Kaz asks, raising a brow.

She laughs lightly. “I can’t believe you never noticed Jesper saying that before. Then again, I guess you *were* busy scheming, weren’t you?”

“Always,” Kaz replies drily.

Inej goes silent for a moment before she says, “Will you—tell me about it?”

Will he? *Can* he? Kaz isn’t sure. The story is pices—broken, interconnected pieces, all the same shape as the cracks in him. But, like he thought before, she deserves to know. He will give her what he can.

“I grew up just a few towns over from Lij,” he says. The words hang in the air, thick and heavy like smoke between them. “I’m not a bastard. My mother died bearing me.” He half expects to have pulled his hand back from hers by now, but instead he’s pressing down on her fingertips, desperate for an anchor. With every word, he feels as if he’s unraveling, faster and faster until it threatens to spin out of control.

“And your father?” Inej prompts, curling her fingers to link the tips with his. Her eyes bore into him like lighthouses, searching.

“I was nine. Crushed beneath a plow. First body I remember seeing.” And the last one that didn’t flood him with memories. It strikes him dimly that it probably isn’t a good thing if the sight of his father’s mangled body doesn’t haunt him after everything else he’s seen and done.

“And…and your brother?” Inej’s voice is barely a whisper now. He can’t make himself meet her eyes anymore.

“Brave. Foolish. Gullible. I…he…” The hand that isn’t touching hers curls into a fist against the table. He can’t do it. He can’t form the words, can’t force them out. His chest constricts with panic at the thought of it. He stares down at the lines of the table, studying them, his face twisted with shame.

It’s shame that eats men whole.

But Inej says, “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

hangs up sign
Please feed the author!

slaps sticky note on the corner
The author is well-trained and will also accept affection.

tapes sheet of notebook paper to the other corner

If you’re here, the author loves you :)

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej consider the could-have-beens. Kaz concocts a plan.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter! Be sure to comment for a shout-out~

PrincessKittyKat52, good to see you again! Also, yes, I don't think Kaz quite realizes how far in he is now—though he will, soon.

Wicked333, I'm as excited as you are! Their progress is slow and complicated, but having this time to just be as themselves is definitely helping.

andyoudoctor, the feeling is mutual! I get so excited seeing your comments. Healthy communication is a rare and beautiful thing for this ship.

Cherr1es_04, welcome to the fic! I hope you enjoy the rest :D

psyche_the_YA_protagonist, first comment, I do believe! Thanks for joining us :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They have made a habit of walking together—sometimes just him and Inej, usually the three of them. It's a foolish thing to play at, and yet Kaz can't bring himself to refuse. The level terrain agrees with him more than the drainpipes, uneven streets, and rooftop mazes of Ketterdam, and he'll begrudgingly admit to himself that the company doesn't hurt. Sometimes they talk, filling the silent world with both light and heavy words that the wind carries like a messenger from one to the other; sometimes they simply wade through the sweet grasses and stand on the rise, watching the world pass in a way that they've never been able to before.

On the third day, it's late morning by the time they take to the fields. Jordan can't seem to follow a straight line; she scrambles around them, hangs back to inspect something she's found, and then totters on ahead in pursuit of a bug or flyaway leaf. Normally, she'll get tired and Inej will have to carry her, but today she is all but buzzing with energy. Kaz wonders if he was ever that happy—and if Inej is thinking the same thing.

The tap of his cane is muffled by the soft earth, so he and Inej are only surrounded by Jordan's giggles and squeals as they walk on, unhurried. These are the times when Kaz almost understands Jesper's draw to the tables. He knows the harm that will come from savoring this moment; he knows the trick that's being played on him by some cruel fate; he knows the illusion that's being wrought; and his common sense would tell him to stay away, to shut it out, to ignore the impossible dream. But he *can't.* Over and over in his criminal career, he's done the supposedly impossible, and yet he can't deny himself this.

"She loves it here," says Inej, her eyes trailing Jordan. The little girl is laying down and making shapes in the grass now, having beaten them to the rise where they usually rest.

"She'll be happy," says Kaz. He's a liar, but he's not lying about this. And what truly shocks him is that he cares at all—that he wants Jordan to be happy. She doesn't deserve the lives they've made.

Inej trails the last few steps to the hill in silence. She stops, still standing, and looks over the striped landscape below. When she looks back at him, her eyes are deep with sadness, deep as the harbor, but she still smiles. "My father was right. You make a good farm boy."

Kaz flicks his suspenders with one gloved thumb. "You look like you belong here." Over her billowy white blouse, the vest she wears is of Suli silk, real silk, jade green. Her hair flows loose down her back in a rippling sheet. It's almost as long as her mother's.

"I only look like it," Inej translates. She gathers the curtain of her hair and pulls it over one shoulder. "Kaz, I'm trying."

"Did I say a thing about that?" he says, taking another step up to stand beside her.

"You didn't have to."

They do say a lot in silence. Her silence is a weapon. His is a shield. His armor.

Maybe that's what she meant, in that encapsulated moment that was so long ago but seems to belong to a time of its own. Maybe that's what she's really wanted, all along. Not his touch, but his words. Honesty from a criminal. Well, he'll never say that she doesn't deserve it, but the question is whether or not it's more than he can give. At least now he'll concede that it's worth trying.

"To look at us, we're the people we could have been," Inej says softly. Her eyes are as clear as the sky, but dark. A black mirror. "A Suli girl and her farm boy."

It's nowhere close to the truth, so he shouldn't clutch at the way she calls him hers. Shouldn't. He does a lot of things that he shouldn't, and he's not stopping now. His eyes fall to Jordan, and he doesn't have to look at Inej to know that she's thinking the same: *And their child. Our child.* No use dwelling on the could-have-been, he knows. And yet.

"I've mastered deception by appearance," Kaz says with a slight tilt of his head towards her.

“Not to me.” From the satchel slung over her shoulder, Inej withdraws an apple and tosses it to him. The hand that he catches it in is bare; it hits his palm with a satisfying smack. While the feeling is strange, the glimmer of hope stirring in Inej’s eyes is worth it. He still feels a bit foolish for having used his sleight of hand to slip the gloves off without her noticing, but her delighted surprise, well, that’s worth it, too.

Jordan almost immediately comes toddling up at the prospect of food. *Nina would love her,* Kaz thinks. He raises his eyebrows skeptically, but he gives Jordan the apple. She has to hold it with both hands.

“You spoil her,” says Inej, sitting down and settling back on her hands.

Kaz joins her. “You insult me.”

“I’m not sure I believe that,” she says.

Kaz starts to think of a retort, but pauses when he notices one strand of hair that’s loose down her back, not swept over her shoulder with the rest. His hand shakes for a moment, whether from restlessness or fear he’s not sure, but it’s steady when he raises it in question.

Inej looks at him curiously.

“You have a…” His throat has gone dry. He can’t even think of the words. It’s such a laughably small thing.

She follows his eyes and touches a hand to the nape of her neck before her fingers find the loose strand and she drops it in understanding. “I do.”

It sounds like a vow, not just the words but how she says them. Kaz shifts so that he’s mostly behind her and extends his hand just a bit further, slow, unsteady. She holds the rest of her hair out of the way as if he’s clasping a necklace around her throat.

He forces himself to close the gap. His fingertip and thumb close around the strand, and it’s just as soft as he always suspected, though he brushes her neck in the process, and it’s all Kaz can do to keep from jerking his hand back. He doesn’t want to hurt her. He sweeps the loose lock into place, his hand bumping against her shoulder as he does so.

There’s a familiar jolt of panic at the first contact, but, he realizes, no bodies, at least not yet. No dark harbor. No desperation, no Jordie.

Jordan. It’s odd how it makes him think of her. He looks over to where she’s sitting, gnawing on the apple, but then she looks up at him and sets it in her lap.

“Careful, you’ll get juice on—” Inej sighs in a way that’s mostly a laugh. “Lost cause.”

Kaz shifts back to his spot next to Inej. “Hands,” Jordan says curiously, wiggling over to sit beside Kaz. His heart hasn’t stopped hammering against his chest, and he stiffens when he feels how close she is. He hears his own tension reflected in Inej’s voice, like a string tuned too tight, when she warns, “Jordan—”

“Big and little,” says Jordan, carefully enunciating each syllable. She still sounds unsure of the words themselves, but certain of their meaning. She holds up one hand, which is very small indeed.

Kaz doesn’t think about the choice. This has always served him in extremes—either very well or very badly. If he’s going to be a fool today, he might as well go all in.

“So they are,” he says, and holds out his hand to her. She blinks at him before giggling delightedly and pressing her hand to his. It’s barely bigger than his palm. His free hand digs into the earth, clutching at the grass, fighting for an anchor. He can’t let the harbor take her from him. Not another Jordan. Not like this.

Inej makes a sound that’s half gasp, half laugh. Kaz looks over at her, and her smile is unbridled, glowing, *beaming*. It’s the kind of smile that he wants to catch and keep like a firefly in a jar. It’s her mother’s smile. It’s the kind of smile he aches to earn again. It almost makes him forget, too.

Jordan’s hand is sticky with apple juice. He’s not sure why it makes a difference, but it tethers him. He’s able to clamp down on the sickness that swirls in him and take this for what it is.

“Very little,” says Jordan, flexing her hand against his. She lifts it to tug on one of his fingers. “Real?”

Inej laughs. First that smile and now this. Kaz is not going to forgive either of them. “Real enough,” he says.

Is Kaz Brekker your real name?

Real enough.

It doesn’t quite feel like it right now. If she asked him now, he’s afraid he would say no. He’s afraid he would say that he is Kaz Rietveld, a boy who would lose everything he as Dirtyhands has worked and fought for. Except her. It’s a gamble, and Kaz doesn’t gamble unless he can cheat.

His eyes fall to his hands, and it occurs to him that this is another problem to solve—another puzzle. His own mind is the most intricate puzzle he’s yet faced, but from this vantage point it’s just an incredibly complex lock in need of picking. Suddenly, the idea seems less frightening and more intriguing.

“What a time for your scheming face,” says Inej. “What is it?”

“I told Wylan that he thinks like a lockpick, but maybe my mind is a lock,” says Kaz, tilting his head to one side. “Not in need of mending, just coaxing open.” It’s a sideways method of getting at the truth, but it’s as open as he’s been with her in some time—years maybe, if ever—and the words are uneven in the way they spill out of him.

“It’ll be a long job,” says Inej, her eyes on him. The sun shimmers along the length of her hair, the breeze lifting it and rippling its reflections. Kaz finds himself mesmerized again, on

the edge of something too dangerous to think about twice.

Kaz slides his hand to hers against the ground, slotting his fingers into the spaces between hers. Four points of contact, each one small. The waves crest and ebb, but he's still standing when they pass. "Luckily I'm renowned for my patience."

Chapter End Notes

cleans the 'Please Feed the Author' sign

leaves plate of waffles out for readers

tapes sticky note to the bottle of syrup reminding you to eat and take care of yourself IRL too <3

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz vs Suli food: The showdown of the century.

Chapter Notes

We have a lot of shout-outs to get through today! Thank you to all of the newcomers who joined us last chapter—I hope you stick around <3

andyoudoctor, Yes, Kaz can win almost any battle, but maybe not against those dratted feelings...

wicked333, More story (and possibly more waffles) is here for you!

AnimusLunari, welcome! Thank you for your sweet comment, and I hope you enjoy my other works too <3

curlyhairedkatniss, the more the merrier! I'll admit to being proud of that description :)

bells_blakes, thank you for joining us! I'm so happy you found the fic and you're enjoying it :D

apocalyps-o, hello and welcome! Kaz POVs are definitely my favorite to write; the boy is so ridiculously poetic in his head.

Violetstar5, welcome to you as well! Thank you so much for your sweet comment (and the treat ;D)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej slips into the kitchen, still feeling the ghost of Kaz's touch. It's sparks on her neck, warmth between her fingers. It's dangerously safe.

Jordan is asleep, and Kaz is in the front room with her father. What they could be talking about, she can't imagine or doesn't want to. She'd wanted to stay, but Kaz had urged her on with his eyes, silently imploring her to trust him. And for a reason beyond reason, she does.

It's only late afternoon, but already the silence is punctuated with the warm, familiar scent of her mother's cooking. She steps up next to Mama, who pushes Inej's hair aside to plant an absentminded kiss on her cheek.

“It smells good, Mama,” Inej says, her first language returning to her as surely as her footing after a wobble on the wire. Her body, her tongue, remembers. It’s like climbing; she trusts herself to know what to do.

“I should hope so,” her mother returns, raising an amused eyebrow. Her face is a rosy, misted mirror to Inej; her expressions are Inej’s expressions, her eyes Inej’s eyes, but open and unwary. Unmixed. Uncomplicated. What a marvelous thing that must be to feel. Inej should know; she’s felt it, surely; but that is a different girl. That girl died somewhere on the sea, the same sea that Inej feels has been her phoenix rebirth.

“You deserve even the obvious truth,” says Inej, stepping to the side to look over the ingredients that are neatly ordered on the counter.

“Mmm, and yet, my love, I am afraid you are going easy.”

A whole section of the counter is taken up with various spices in fiery shades. Inej’s lips twist upwards. “I may be going easy, but you’re not, Mama. I would say you’re testing Kaz if I didn’t know better.” It’s an avoidance of sorts, but the conversation her mother was leading her to isn’t one that she wants to have now, not with the peace of the fields fresh in her mind and Kaz stirring hope in her again. They’re both losing their caution. It doesn’t scare her as much now as it usually does.

“Testing?” Mama stirs and has a taste. “This is not testing, Inej. This *is* easy.”

Inej doesn’t quite hide a smile. “The Kerch love their salt, but they don’t season much beyond that.” Before Mama gets worried, she adds, “It will be a chance to try new things for him. Besides, I’ll have fun.”

“And of that you need more, Inej.”

It hurts to agree.

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They start dinner with a prayer, as always. And as always, Inej doesn’t hear the rough stone of Kaz’s voice among the rest. She’s not so petty as to check if his eyes are closed, though she’s certain they’re not. She can almost hear him: *Wouldn’t you say it’s blasphemy for me to play at thanking your Saints?* The worst part is, she might just agree. Or he would say that he’ll thank the Saints when they give him something worth his gratitude. Or merely something about how gratitude is only the weight of debt in the Barrel. And he teases *her* about proverbs.

Jordan has been propped up on several cushions, but she’s still at a funny angle to the table. Her restlessness reminds Inej of Jesper, the way that she pats the tabletop and kicks her legs or hums tunelessly. Of course, her new grandparents, seated on either side, adore her; they take great pleasure in cooing and murmuring to her, playing with her, and making her laugh.

She’ll be happy here, Inej tells herself. *Look at her. She* is *happy here.*

She feels more than sees Kaz's gaze on her, burning cold like frostbite. She turns to meet his eyes, and his meaning is indiscernible, but somehow she's certain that he's thinking the same thing that she is. Though, maybe that's just her foolish hope talking. And in either case, it changes nothing. What's best for Jordan is clear and unaffected by her feelings, whether Kaz shares them or not.

He's seated next to her father, which is a turn of events that Inej regards with something like suspicion. While the two men seem to get along well, they have next to nothing in common, except, apparently, for this life in the country that Inej still knows next to nothing about.

I grew up a few towns over from Lij.

(And your father?)

I was nine. Crushed beneath a plow. First body I remember seeing.

(And your brother?)

Brave. Foolish. Gullible.

The pieces all add up to something, but she doesn't have Kaz's love of puzzles nor his gift for them. And if he's right, that he's a puzzle, a lock in need of picking, then the only one who can solve it is Kaz himself.

But she believes that he can.

A sharp scent interrupts her thoughts; Mama delivers several dishes to the table, steaming faintly. The smell is in full fire now, passion and warmth, herbs and spices, and it hits the back of Inej's throat like a punch. The memories strike like an unexpected gust of wind, threatening to bowl her over with the ache of all that she's missed.

She could have spent years knowing that smell, eating with her family, running through the fields of inland Ravka. She could have grown up in the sun, not the shadows of a city. She might even have met a boy, maybe one who looked like Bajan, a normal, sweet boy who would bring flowers and songs like her parents promised. Not men who crushed her beneath their bodies. Not a broken boy put together at wrong angles, who never answered anything right side up.

But that same boy, across from her now, sees her fists curl against the tabletop. His dark eyes search her, and for once they are clear. He mouths, *Inej,* and even the imagining of his voice brings her back.

There's only what is. That's what he would say.

What is, is Mama dishing out the meal—one of Inej's favorites. It's Papa making faces at Jordan to make her giggle. It's Jordan making grabby hands for a dish and spoon of her own. And it's Kaz, taking everything in, observing carefully, but trying for her. She's never seen him so polite. The fact that this matters to him warms her as well as her mother's spiced tea.

“Oh, I remember that you like this one,” says Papa. His Kerch seems to have improved. Maybe that’s what he and Kaz were talking about? Inej will ask one or the other of them later.

For now, she smiles and helps herself, choosing her words so that Mama will understand them. “I’d almost forgotten. I don’t know how you remembered.”

“Inej,” says Mama in Suli, “We remembered everything. All the pieces of you that we still had.”

Inej looks down at her plate. That keen ache takes hold of her again, sharp and throbbing. It’s possible, she knows now, to miss what you never had. She misses it so much that the pain is almost physical.

But once again, Kaz’s eyes are on her. He doesn’t know what her mother said, but maybe it doesn’t matter as long as he knows her. He can’t reach across the table and take her hand like someone else might, but there is so much in those eyes that it almost doesn’t matter.

“Thank you,” says Inej, first in Suli, then in Kerch. “Thank you.”

“It is no favor to love you,” her father says, still in Kerch for Kaz’s benefit. “It is easy.”

Inej’s eyes sting, but it’s a welcome feeling. Especially since, in the corner of her vision, she sees Kaz almost smile.

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As the evening wears on, Inej nearly forgets.

Jordan seems determined to eat more than the rest of them combined, and of course her grandparents will refuse her nothing. She wields her spoon a bit like a weapon, but she manages to make a minimal mess for all that. The Ghafas are not, however, too busy laughing at her to laugh at Kaz.

Inej has never seen his face so red. He reminds her, in these rare times, that legal adult or no, part of him is still a proud, stubborn boy. He has struggled through barely half of one serving, and by now, Inej half expects steam to be coming from his ears. She particularly enjoys the fact that he is staring her down, as if she challenged him to do this. Well, she’s certainly not going to stop him.

Jordan, meanwhile, gobbles her way through her third helping, completely oblivious. If Inej were over there beside her, she’d wipe the little girl’s mouth clean, but Mama does it instead.

“Some water, Kaz?” She almost calls him Dirtyhands, for the sake of juxtaposing his intimidating persona with this situation, but she can’t see that shadow of him in the boy in front of her. Brekker or Dirtyhands or whatever his name was before, he’s just Kaz now. *Her* Kaz, she’d say in a better world.

“I’m fine.” He’s even breathing hard. Inej can’t quite suppress a laugh. What a gloriously normal problem to have—weak Kerch taste buds versus Suli cooking. It’s a world away from

rainy slopes and crows on windowsills and kill-or-be-killed in the Barrel.

“Just let me know when you’re done,” she says sweetly.

“Worry about assisting the actual child, perhaps?” says Kaz, a flush still high in his cheeks. Now she can’t tell if it’s from embarrassment or from the spices.

“Why do you think I’m asking you?” Inej props her chin on one fist, half-lidding her eyes smugly. She’s not sure that her mother is following the conversation, but Papa chuckles.

“I couldn’t fathom,” says Kaz, far more angrily than the situation merits, and stubbornly takes another bite.

Inej wonders how far they’ll get before his eyes start watering. In the meantime, she should probably tell Jordan that she can’t have a fourth plate.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so excited about all of the newcomers to this fic! Welcome to the family, and as always, leave a comment for a shout-out :D

sets out two plates of waffles so there's enough for everyone

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz gets advice from Inej's father—and a tan.

Chapter Notes

I finally figured out where all of the new people came from—silly author not realizing until a week or two ago that I had to change the chapter's publication date to the actual day of posting, otherwise it would default to the day I first posted this story. No wonder it wasn't on the first page of updated works before. Well, speaking of all those new people, time for shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, not a new person but beloved and loyal, I like your take that Kaz was trying for Inej and Jordan. Personally, I think he was just being stubborn, but maybe there was some of that in there, too.

wicked333, I already said this in my reply, but I still can't get over the fact that I surpassed waffles. <3

Cherokee, your wish is my command! They're having that conversation right about now.

Cherr1es_04, thank you so much!! And yeah, I can't handle spice either.

ArcticL87, congrats on finishing Crooked Kingdom! I support you on your quest to devour SoC content :D

AnimusLunari, thank you!! I love it when people point out their favorite quotes, and I do love some internal monologue if I'm being honest.

hardly_a_ghost, hello! I did think that you all deserved some fluff...for now >:)

rainstormdragon, I'm glad you like my metaphor! Also, cool username.

YouGottaFlipItTurnWays, ALL THE HEARTS. <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej is braiding her hair when she finally asks him, so it takes Kaz’s mind a moment to comprehend the question.

“What were you talking to my father about?” she asks, her fingers moving through the silky strands of hair the same way that Kaz’s own hands work a deck of cards. Her movements are silk themselves, fluid, seamless, a seemingly endless pattern of sliding the gleaming locks over one another. Kaz knows he couldn’t do it as well, but has to wrestle down a powerful urge to try.

“You,” he says. “The one thing we have in common.”

He sees her cheeks redden—pomegranate, dusty rose. He shouldn’t have taken that risk the day before. Now he’s fighting a near-constant battle with himself against the want for her that’s almost an ache in its own right.

“What did he say?” she says. She finishes off the braid and ties it with a length of scarlet ribbon. It won’t be the first time a red ribbon has doomed him, Kaz reflects darkly.

“Memories,” says Kaz. “Your parents find the sentiment to be worth keeping them around. He says it eased the loss.” For his own part, Kaz is doubtful of that, and he’s well aware that it shows. He’s found memories to be like keeping a wound open—it’s near certain to fester. No wonder his healed wrong.

“You don’t believe him,” Inej muses, sliding the braid over her shoulder and curling into her makeshift bed. Between them, Jordan is already asleep, and the candle is burning low into the shadows.

“I’ve learned differently,” says Kaz, pulling his legs up onto the bed to sit back against the headboard. The cut across his back twinges slightly, but then settles. He doesn’t know why he’s telling her this—he never does. It’s a shock to him as much as anyone when what comes out of his mouth is a bleeding truth rather than an obfuscating metaphor.

“Remembering them kept me alive at the Menagerie,” Inej says quietly. She’s curled up on one side, her arm tucked under her head. If Kaz can barely stand the sight of decay, he wonders how she ever sleeps. He never used to care enough to wonder.

He stares at the candle, imagines the name of the Menagerie burning in it like a doomed moth. “Perhaps the Suli are more sentimental.”

“We live on risk,” says Inej. The shadows are low on her face, and yet it still gleams. “High wires with no net. You always know the odds.”

“I wonder if you would still believe that when I tell you that he asked me to join his work tomorrow,” says Kaz, looking at the ceiling. He rolls his head sideways. “Under the guise of seeing what I remember. I expect he’ll want to talk about you again.”

In truth, Kaz would rather face a gang brawl any day. He doubts they’ll just be sharing memories this time.

Inej, to her credit, doesn’t look amused—only contemplative. “And you agreed?”

“So I did. By all rights, it puts you in my debt, but I swore you’d be beholden to no one, so perhaps you’ve finally forced me to do something beyond my own benefit.”

Inej’s eyes slide closed. “Just say it was out of the goodness of your heart, Kaz.”

“Impossible,” he says. “I’d need a good heart for that.” But he looks at her, shadows and candlelight and feathered lashes against her cheeks, and thinks that she is the only heart he has, and she is good against all odds.

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Kaz is not a late sleeper by any means, when he sleeps at all, but it still seems early when he cracks his eyes open before sunrise. He dresses in a rush, glancing over at Inej briefly and wondering what her mornings were like on the *Wraith.* Did she sit in her cabin and braid her hair? Did she rise before the sun and climb until she could beat it into the sky? She lights every room before it gets the chance. Like her other enemies, the sun won’t know she’s winning until she’s won.

His clothes have gotten gradually plainer since he first arrived; today Kaz wears only a linen shirt and a simple pair of trousers, besides his gloves. He’d like to roll the sleeves up against the heat, but that’s more risk than he wants to take. He takes his cane with him, though he’s expecting to have his hands full.

He crosses through the main room and out onto the porch, from there down and around to the wide expanse of land behind the house. Inej’s father is already there, dressed alarmingly similarly to Kaz—or maybe, worse yet, Kaz is dressed alarmingly similar to *him.* He needs to get back to his city. Whoever he is right now couldn’t keep a handle on an empire.

“I was surprised that you said yes. But pleased,” the older man says. His accent is careful and precise, stronger than Inej’s, his speech measured. This isn’t, Kaz senses, just because of his unfamiliarity with Kerch, but also because this is a man who thinks through everything he says.

“What better ways do I have to occupy myself?” Kaz asks, one eyebrow arched. It’s the kind of comment for which Inej would scowl at him with that satisfying little furrow between her brows, but her father takes it as a joke and jokes back.

“You insult my daughter’s company.” He tosses Kaz a slice of bread—spiced, but only with something like cinnamon, thank goodness. Kaz would prefer to push the previous night’s humiliation into his ever-growing pile of abandoned memories.

“Or I elevate yours,” Kaz suggests, limping over the extra steps to trade his cane for some sort of spade. Maybe it’s the warmer weather or the more even terrain, but his leg has been surprisingly good these past few days.

“I am a simple old man, but I am no fool, Mr. Brekker. No young man like you would prefer me to Inej.”

Kaz digs the tip of the spade into the earth and notes its sharp point. It's lucky that most farmers lack violent tendencies, considering the deadly implements at their disposal. He thins his lips and flings some loose earth aside. Inej's father has no idea what *young men like you* means. They are men who look for a weapon in everything. They are men who would find his daughter and give him back a girl of blades and shadows that he doesn't know. Kaz has never been ashamed of what he is, and he's not ashamed now, but now he knows what it might feel like.

And then there's the matter of his implications. If the old man isn't a fool, well, neither is Kaz. He knows when he's being baited. Inej must have gotten her subtlety from her mother.

Or from mine, Kaz thinks, recalling the time he called Ketterdam his mother.

At last, he settles on, "I'm sure Inej warned you that I'm a liar. I only didn't expect to be caught in it so soon."

His companion joins Kaz's efforts regarding the soil with a large, slender-headed spade that makes thin, deep holes in the soil. The memory of Jordie using just such a tool, and Kaz standing on it but still being too small to push it into the earth, hits him like the overpowering perfume of spring grasses and wildflowers. His grip on the spade's handle tightens against his gloves, and he blinks hard to right his focus.

"She does not say much about you," says Inej's father, pausing to regard Kaz with a look of consideration. "That you saved her from that—that awful woman." He spits out a word in Suli, a word that Kaz doesn't need to know to understand its meaning. "That you brought us together again."

And yet further apart, Kaz thinks, recollecting all too clearly their stiff, stilted conversation on the first day. He feels that clash of two worlds again now, in the expectations he was not made to meet. The Ghafas are good people. He envies them and pities them in equal measure.

"It was the least she deserved, and not entirely without selfish motive," Kaz says evenly, tossing another shovelful of earth aside. It tugs on his stitches and he grimaces. How he feels about Inej is a selfish thing; her pain hurts him, so he never wants her to hurt. Her smile thrills him, so he wants to make her smile every minute."The Barrel changed her, but not as much as most people."

"As you?" the old man asks with the same intuition, the same curious gaze and gentle probing that his daughter has mastered so well. "You hold that spade like a man who knows how."

"I'm a quick study," says Kaz. "Which answers both of your questions."

They've made an even line of fresh-turned earth, holes for the seeds spaced every few inches. The sun is barely coming up and Kaz is warm already. Ridiculous. Inej's father stops to look over their work. "Inej seems to fear for the things you are slower to learn, Mr. Brekker."

“I’ve survived this long without them.” Kaz doesn’t like where this conversation is going. Never mind that he’s sensed it from the start; he makes it his business to be in control of a conversation, and he doesn’t plan to give it up now. “And you said that she didn’t tell you much about me.”

“But even after these years, and the ship and the knives, I know my daughter. I can see where her heart aims.”

Kaz draws a neat line of overturned soil, more out of contemplation than the pattern he’s fallen into. “A dangerous business.”

Inej’s father catches up to him with a line of even indents in the earth. “You gave her the ship and the knives. Is that not dangerous?”

Not nearly as dangerous as giving her myself.

“They made her dangerous,” says Kaz, squinting against the rising sun. “But she was dangerous when I met her. She could always have been. The girl you see now is that, realized.”

“I loved her as I knew her and I love her as she is,” says the old man, leaning on his spade in a mirror of Kaz’s position. There is a hard gleam in his dark eyes that makes Kaz wonder if he’s underestimated him. “Do you?”

There it is.

“That,” says Kaz, “is where the danger lies.”

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It’s midday when he goes back in, after hours of more silence than not. He’s glad for his cane by now; terrain and weather regardless, his leg has started to complain. Inej greets the two men in the front room, where she’s playing with Jordan.

“How did it go?” she asks.

“Warm,” Kaz sighs, pushing his hair back off of his forehead. There are beads of sweat around his collar.

“That’s not even half an answer,” says Inej, motioning him down to the chair beside her. She’s obviously in a good mood, due no doubt to the company of Jordan, who is teaching her the “sock game”.

“Ask anyone,” says Kaz, taking the offered seat and propping his bad leg up on a low ottoman. “I’m cheap.”

“Not now, you aren’t,” says Inej, pausing only to groan dramatically as she’s defeated by Jordan. “I was in Ketterdam long enough to see the Crow Club taking up half the street.”

“The less of East Stave is covered in glitter and eye-damaging colors, the better,” says Kaz. “Call it public service.”

“Public service with profit.”

“Then I’m practically a member of the Council.”

Inej gives him an unimpressed look, which is somewhat ruined by her failure to cover a smile. She pauses before her eyes trail over him in a way that makes him feel unnervingly exposed. “I think you got a tan.”

On his face and nowhere else. Won’t *that* be a fashion statement. Well, he’s rich enough now that he doesn’t have to worry about people’s opinions on these things (and his haircut is *fine* , Zenik, it’s *practical.*) “I fear for my reputation.”

“I can hear the terror in your voice,” Inej responds with equal sarcasm. “Okay, all right, Jordan, if you insist on defeating me again. I’m back.”

Jordan whoops gleefully and returns to her attack.

“Sock isn’t much of a weapon,” Kaz says idly. “Maybe we should get her—”

“You finish that sentence and I’ll remind you what a real weapon can do, Kaz.”

Kaz is deeply disturbed by how enthralling that sounds.

Chapter End Notes

I did this before, but just for all the newbies, if you're looking for something to read while you wait for the next chapter, I also have...

renegades in the ring: a circus AU where everyone is mostly happy, Kaz is a magician, Inej is an acrobat, and Jordie is alive.

Catch and Release: a little Kanej moment post-CK where they learn to sit together.

the ichor in their veins needs feeding: A handful of modern AU snapshots and moments.

the willows' lullaby: Kaz and Inej have survived against the odds, long enough to die together. Maybe read the circus AU after this one, haha.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej share a quiet morning and form a proper alliance.

Chapter Notes

It is Wednesday my dudes, so time for a new chapter and some shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, I do love writing banter. While my tendency is towards angst, especially for this pairing, the banter is <3. Also, I just might tuck the hair braiding idea away in my outline…

wicked333, more story is here for you! Hope you enjoy!

kazuqlsimp, I think you're as excited as I am!

Cherokee, keep an eye out for that quote in future chapters!

Cherr1es_04, what can I say but *wink wink*

ArcticL87, thank you so much!! <3

lilieswho, welcome back! I think the Ghafas sort of function as a stand-in for the reader here, as the shippers that we all are.

alltheworldisinmyhead, I don't know why, but I am incredibly flattered by binge reads. I'm also insanely excited that you like my characterizations. I can barely even touch on the comparison of my writing to Leigh's without descending into incoherent hand-flapping, so basically, you know how to make a writer's week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rising to greet the sun is different here from Ketterdam, different even from the sea. The sky is clear and impossibly wide, soft as a blanket swaddling the earth. Inej sees it through the window across the room, the window over Kaz's bed.

He's still asleep, as is Jordan. The latter is a common occurrence, but usually Kaz is up first, if his nightmares haven't woken him already. He's learned, like she did, to have them quietly. Inej is willing to bet that these few days have been the most he's slept in longer than she wants to consider.

The lack of responsibility has to be jarring for him; it is for Inej, and she's only been a captain for two years, compared to the time he's spent all but running—and eventually leading—the Dregs.

You wouldn't know it to look at him now.

The sharp lines of his face are softened and blurred at the edges. He's not so pale as he was, and the ever-present furrow between his brows is smooth. His breathing is even, all of the tension in his strong frame relaxed. There's even a dusting of freckles over his cheeks. He looks so young.

Is this what he would've been like, if he never came to Ketterdam?

If she died at the Menagerie? If Jesper fell in with a gang less able to protect him? If Matthias wasted away in Hellgate? If Nina ended up working in one of Rollins' pleasure houses? If Wylan was killed the second he hit the streets of the Barrel?

So much has been saved from so much evil. So many lives spared by the destruction of one, and the carnage left behind. It isn't simple. It isn't fair.

Oh, little lynx, life isn't fair, Tante Heleen would say. *There are only those who are kind to you and those who are cruel.*

Heleen would call herself kind, too, so who's to say what else she was wrong about?

Kaz is wrong about many things, too, but she believes him when he says *there's only what is.* No use in could-have-beens, even if this trip has been a string of them.

That, however, is to say nothing about what could *be.*

Inej knows the feeling of a precipice—of curling her toes over the very edge, willing the wind not to change, the swoop in her stomach that tells her something is coming. She wants to stay on the edge of the change forever. She doesn't want to see it come, because she knows she will fall. This is that feeling.

But Kaz opens his eyes. The wind swirls and settles. Inej tucks her arm under her head, and breathes.

He meets her gaze but stays quiet. His eyes are soft and dark in the pale dawn.

Inej rises and pads past Jordan, around the end of his bed to the window, and easily hoists herself onto the sill. She slides up until she's sitting beside his head, her back against the window frame, the dim sun on her side. It's the way she used to sit in his window, she remembers, when she would feed the crows.

"Morning," Kaz murmurs. His voice is deeper than usual, rough from sleep in a way that's more gravel than tone, in a way that Inej *feels.* It burns in her chest like she's the one talking.

"So they *do* call it beauty sleep for a reason," she muses, rolling her head to one side to look at him. She's just in time to catch a red flush creeping up his chest and a temporary stilling of

that sharp tongue of his.

Take that, Inej thinks smugly. That'll be her revenge for his comment back in the field the other day. Words she hasn't stopped thinking about since.

"Flattery won't sway me, Wraith."

"And calling me *Wraith* won't stop your blushing."

Kaz scowls at her, but there's not much true feeling behind it. She would know. She's seen his real glare.

"You've got freckles," she adds, fluttering her fingers towards him. "I suppose you and the sun can get along after all."

"Not enough," Kaz replies quietly, shifting into more of a sitting position against the headboard. "And maybe that's for the better."

"How do you mean?"

He runs one thumb across the bridge of his nose as if he's hoping to smudge away the offending marks. "I have to go back to the city looking like this. No one will take me seriously."

Inej knows he's making a joke, but there's a part of it that he means. The feeling of a precipice returns, and this time, she leaps. "Do you? Do you have to go back?"

He's silent, but not the kind of silence that tells her he's holding back a *yes.* Not like it was in his office when she first returned. Somehow, she'd thought that if he'd chosen her once, he might do it again.

"You know I do," he says. "You and your family can say what you like. I don't belong here."

There's a reckless glory in having nothing to lose because you've already lost it all. Inej seizes it. "Could you?"

Kaz goes quiet again, looking past her out the window. She slips one of her hands from its place on her lap and lets it hang down, fingertips dangling over his bare palm. He can close the distance if he chooses to. "Could you belong with me?" she asks.

Kaz curls his hand so that her fingertips slot into the places between his, a touch but not quite a grasp. Hope lifts its head warily in Inej, but he says, "Do you belong here?"

Part of her does. Part of her will always hold the girl who turned cartwheels in the fields until her parents dragged her home. Part of her contains, somewhere, the girl who put on her best silks, *real* silks, to dance with the fireflies. That girl lives here. But she is a ghost, dancing and tumbling through the grass forever with no one left to call her home. She will never realize that her body is being used and broken. She will chase the sun forever.

Inej is not that girl.

“I wasn’t going to stay,” she says. “The real wraith is the girl who lives here, the ghost girl I left behind. Sometimes I think I can vanish so well because I’m not a whole person, because I lost her.”

“Ah, but I don’t have your gift, and you are more whole than I will ever be.” Kaz flashes her a wry smile and gives the side of her hand a gentle caress with his thumb.

“You say that,” says Inej, her eyes on their hands, “but, at risk of making you think too much about it, look at what we can do now.”

Kaz’s mouth twists, and for a moment she thinks he’s going to let go, but instead he swallows hard and regains himself, his fingers flexing against hers. “It’s not enough.”

“It wasn’t going to be,” Inej murmurs, returning his soft caress. “Not so soon. But maybe if neither of us is whole, we are shaped right for each other’s broken places.”

“You don’t want to fix—”

“No. I want to be there while you do.”

Kaz shifts their tangled hands onto his lap, the movements tentative and slow. “I have to go back. But you have to go back to your ship.”

Say it, Inej wills. *Tell me what you mean. Tell me and I might stay.*

“I do,” she says, and hope rises in her, prepared to leap at his word.

The chance comes and goes. The wind changes, and it’s gone. Inej feels it go still.

“What about Jordan?” he says. It’s not what she was waiting for, but it’s better than what she was expecting.

“Don’t ask me that,” Inej says wistfully, turning her head to look out at the lightening sky over the fields. “I said she was going to stay, and my parents love her.”

“So do you,” says Kaz. “You deserve someone so uncomplicated to love.”

Inej purses her lips. “Not subtle.”

“Didn’t mean to be.”

“Of course.” Inej sweeps a strand of hair away from her face with her free hand and presses her palm against the window. “If I got what I deserved, Kaz, I would never have met you. And I’d be doing penance now instead of taking my blessed revenge. It’s not about what I deserve. It’s about what I want.”

They had this conversation before, when they first arrived here; it was a jumble of double meanings and half-truths. This is better. The soft touch of his hand against hers, long white fingers against her lithe brown ones, is better.

“Want,” Kaz muses. His hand loosens against hers, but tenses with his next words. “I *need* you, Inej.” It breaks from him like a muted groan, like a drowning man’s first gasp of air. A thrill ripples through Inej’s body, but in the same moment, she almost pulls away—she has heard those words in that tone from men before, though they never used her name. The fear almost tears her from the moment.

“You don’t need me,” she whispers. “We don’t need each other. But we are better as a pair.”

“I could—I could work with you.” His gaze is fixed past her, out on the fields. “You hunt slavers on the seas and I fight them in the city. It would be…a reason to write.”

A smile breaks slowly over Inej’s face, sure and patient as the sunrise. She drops her shoulder to slide her hand all the way into his, knitting them with a tight and precious grasp. “They’ll never see us coming.”

“Brick by brick,” says Kaz.

And maybe that applies to their demons, too. They will destroy them together. They’ll attack unsuspected. Brick by brick.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as well to everyone who went and read my other works!

puts out waffles with powdered sugar Just keep your sticky hands off of the story ;)

Inej/Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz makes a promise he can't keep. The consequences of keeping Jordan become clear —and real.

Chapter Notes

alltheworldisinmyhead, yeah, I will address in a future chapter the way that they aren't really the type for confessions and promises, but this was a really big step!

lilieswho, I plan to make a joke about writing without a reason in future ;) but I don't think he's realized yet that it's okay to just talk to her.

wicked333, here's what happens next—fear not!

andyoudoctor, I think that this is all connected, honestly. They're realizing that what they have is not dependence but instead a recognition of how they have already saved one another time and time again.

curlyhairedkatniss, you're welcome for the mental image :)

AnimusLunari, I'm so happy that you liked the ghost quote! That was one of my favorite parts of the chapter.

Cherokee, the puzzle metaphor is my favorite <3

R_umpel, binge reading is the way to win my heart! Also, yes indeedy, this story is tagged as pining for a reason XD

Gradually_Watermelon, another malinda fan!! Also, thank you!!

They have a proper parley in the sun-drenched living room. It’s different from the shadowed alleys of Ketterdam in plenty of ways, but most notably in the hoped-for outcome; this time, the hours they spend strategizing, side by side but apart, their shadows mingling on the walls, is directed towards minimizing the carnage. This meeting calls for as little damage as possible to both sides.

Inej stands with the posture she’s known all her life, straight as a blade, the one her parents mirror. Jordan sits on her hip, clinging to her shirt. Kaz stands behind her, gloved hands

folded nearly over his cane, his white shirt crisp and buttoned. She's used to being his backup, but it's not so bad having things the other way around.

Her parents sit across from them in a pair of sturdy chairs, their expressions open but their postures looking for all the world like they're about to scold Inej for trying something reckless on the wire. There are empty seats—enough for the three of them—but Inej remains standing, and Kaz follows suit. She needs to be grounded in her patience for this. She needs to remember her strength.

"I needed this. So did Jordan," she says. The little girl looks up at the sound of her name with an inquisitive coo, her brown eyes wide. Inej's arm holds steady beneath her. Inej speaks in Suli, not the language of trade but the language of unspoken love that knits them all together. Kaz has helped her put this speech together enough that he doesn't need to understand it by now. "She wasn't part of the plan, but she is more than that now. She's part of our family."

Kaz shifts behind her with a slight creak, a murmuring rustle. She doesn't look at him. Whether or not he is included in the unspoken collective is his own choice. Inej only knows her path.

"You told me that my heart was an arrow, that it needs aim. I had my aim before I got you back. I love you as much as my heart can love, but I can't stay here."

Her father has her mother's hand tight in his, his thumb stroking gently across the back of her hand. They are so close, even with the chair's arms between them, moving not in tandem but as if in a dance where each knows their part. Inej aches for it.

"We know," he says. "Inej, we never expected you to stay. You are free and you are happy, and wherever you are, you will be loved." His gaze moves briefly over Inej's shoulder, and she senses Kaz shifting behind her again. Still, he doesn't say a word.

Mama extends her hands, and Inej slowly walks forward, allowing her mother to clasp her free hand and look up into her face. She touches her fingertips to Inej's cheek. "You are strong and brave, my love, stronger and braver than you should ever need to be. Just write to us. And when we reunite with our caravan, perhaps you'll come home?"

Inej holds Jordan tighter with both hands, pressing a kiss to the child's head for the sake of looking away. "I will."

"She will be safe."

The words come from behind her. They are simple words, the accent rough and clipped, the language unsure, the rasp unmistakable. It's her language in a voice she knows better than the skyline of Ketterdam or the fields of her home.

Tears brim in Inej's eyes and she cups Jordan's head with one hand, holding her close in an echo of Kaz's promise. It's an unreasonable promise. It's a foolish promise. It's a contradiction of the *no mourners* that they've whispered into the dark too many times to count. It's a target.

But, then again, so are they—which Inej remembers clearly when the gunshots sound.

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Kaz's cane is off the ground and braced as a weapon the second he hears the shots. Inej has dragged her parents down below the window and shoved a wailing Jordan into her mother's arms.

Her father demands something in Suli, talking too fast and low for Kaz's new and extremely limited vocabulary to make out. Inej's reply is short and sharp, her focus narrowed to a knife's point. She springs up and all but appears beside Kaz, who's already gotten low.

"Close," she says in Kerch. "East."

"Northeast," he corrects.

"Pedant."

"Cautious."

"You? Never."

Nonetheless, she follows him out the door, sticking to the walls, her hand poised to flick a knife down into its waiting palm. The house doesn't appear to have been struck; certainly, the windows are all intact; but the shots came from around the side, and Kaz's apprehension whittles to a point as they creep up to the corner of the house.

"Slavers?" Kaz murmurs.

"Here?" Her brows draw together, her lips pursed.

"Jordan?"

"We sank their ship. What about you?"

"No one knows I'm here."

"The city leaks, Kaz."

He braces his cane against the earth. This half-crouched position is far from comfortable. "Doesn't matter who they are as long as they're shooting at us."

"Well, unless you've learned to deflect bullets—"

"No more of those, are there?"

Their whispers fall still, and they listen. Kaz's mind is whirring. Those were warning shots. Their attacker or attackers must still be decently far off. No way to guess at numbers, or how well armed they are. And this after Kaz made a fool of himself, making promises he can't keep. Back to the ones he can, then.

“No mourners,” he says, meeting the golden swirl of Inej’s eyes, the tilt of her black brows, the sweep of her lashes.

“No funerals,” she says, flicking the knife into her hand.

Kaz looks up before rounding the corner, while Inej is up the side of the house; she’ll be on the roof in seconds. Meanwhile, he’s already looking as soon as he’s out from the cover of the wall. It’s open fields for miles. How would anyone—

Another shot rings out. Lucky for Kaz, their aim is terrible, but it does hit the side of the house.

The Ghafas are in there.

Jordan *is in there.*

His anticipation boils into rage, just the kind of rage that he needs to carry him into whatever’s coming. The land dips down perhaps fifty yards out, so whoever’s shooting at him must be hiding behind that rise. He trusts that Inej has seen it and starts to cross the open ground.

He can just hear her chastising him later— *Are you insane?—Of course.—* but that’s an optimistic projection that assumes they both survive. Kaz can work with that. He needs to lure their attackers out and get them back towards the house so that Inej can jump down on them.

He’s barely halfway to the dip before several figures, clothed in dark homespun, burst out. Only one has a rifle slung across his back. The others presumably have weapons hidden in their clothes, but all the better if Kaz can take them down before they get a chance to use them.

He wishes he had a lapel to smooth. The best he can do now is to stand straight, knife-straight like Inej does and like her parents do and like Jordan will someday, and fold his hands over his cane. And he *smiles.* It’s a smile that shows blood on his teeth if you don’t look too closely, and at least it gives them pause. Good.

It’s not going to last, of course; the one with the rifle swings it into his hands and takes aim. Advantages of distance. Kaz kept the pistol he’d stolen from that slaver, but he doesn’t have it on him.

The city’s more patient than you, Kaz , Jordie muses in his head. *It’s been waiting to take you down, and see, now you’ve gone soft. Now’s its chance.*

The voice in his head isn’t his brother’s voice. Not really. And if it is, it’s the voice of a boy who failed him. He has better things, brighter things to depend on.

Watch me live.

So when Kaz sees, even this far out, the man’s finger flex against the trigger, it’s too late. He’s already disappeared.

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Inej watches from the roof and only has a minor heart attack. Kaz and that Saints-forsaken smoke bomb of his. How he pulled it off in an open field is a mystery even to her. Also, now she has to find him.

She drops from a crouch to lay on her stomach, parallel to the ridge of the roof, and shimmies sideways to the very edge. From there, she gets a hold of the eave and rolls under, drawing on her core until she can brace her feet against the rafters and wedge herself into the space. She's got her back to the people below her now, though, and can't see a thing, so she crosses one hand under the other, braces her feet again, and flips over. There's a moment where her grip shakes and her stomach drops, but she regains it as soon as it falters, and now she can see what's going on below.

The rafter she's gripping digs into her hands, but she knows how to avoid getting splinters. Meanwhile, Kaz is somehow almost directly below her, a dark blot against the beige-wheat landscape. Three of the four men are coming at him while the fourth follows, reloading. She'll bet that Kaz knew what kind of gun he has and counted off how many shots were left —Kaz would.

She needs a way to propel herself at the one with the rifle and get him out of the way. She's too high up just to drop from here, but she has no way to signal to Kaz to give her a launch point. Just this once, she misses Ketterdam, the way it lends itself to her set of skills. Not so much the open plains.

While she keeps an eye on Kaz, who's handling the men ably so far, Inej drops her feet so that she's hanging from the rafter and swings forward to wrap her legs around the drainpipe that runs from the roof. Now she can creep down, twisting to keep an eye on the fight, until she's low enough to—

The one with the rifle is taking aim again. She's not low enough. That's not important anymore.

Inej drops one hand so that she's hanging off of the drainpipe like a flag, puts her feet against the wall, and leaps.

She can pretend there's a trapeze to catch. She can pretend she's reaching for her wings. It doesn't matter. She is a knife, thrown, flying. She is an arrow.

Her feet slam into the man's chest; his gun goes off at the sky, while Inej digs her knee into his sternum and rests Sankt Petyr against his throat.

"That bullet will fall," he croaks.

"Let's hope it doesn't hit you, then," says Inej, as if they're discussing the chance of rain. It's not so bad when the man is beneath *her* . Impossible thoughts of Kaz come and go, as wily as Inej herself. "Or me, since my hand might slip."

“Yeah it will,” he grunts, and he throws his weight upward. Inej is prepared, but when she slams him back down, the gun goes skittering off to one side and goes off somewhere in the process, grazing her leg. It is only a graze, but she grunts and jerks forward, and her careful pressure on Sankt Petyr drives the blade into his neck. Inej pulls back—there’s warm blood running down her thigh now, and on her hands, and on his shirt—but she went too deep, too fast. Her position had been poised to make good on her threat, and blood is spurting from him now, gushing over her hands. She shakes it off as well as she can and leaps to her feet, staggering slightly when the pull makes her leg sting.

The man looks vaguely familiar. Has she fought him before? No gang tattoos or otherwise identifying marks, but on the sea one battle and another aren’t so different.

She turns around and scoops up the gun; she doesn’t know how many shots it has left, and she wouldn’t know how to use it beyond the basics, but Kaz will be able to. Maybe he could use the help, she thinks, and starts running, ignoring the pain in her leg.

This is the man who fought an entire gang and won, but the men—whoever they are—have put up a decent fight. That said, one of them is already down, probably with his ankles broken by the looks of it. The second is on his way—as Inej watches, he tries to dig a knife under Kaz’s ribs, and before Inej can answer the rage that blooms in her, Kaz gets the blade from underneath and spins it, aiming the point under his attacker’s chin and slamming it upwards.

The third one is going from behind to grab Kaz with an arm around his throat. Inej hefts the gun into position—she can at least pretend that she knows what to do with it—but Kaz whirls and breaks the man’s nose with his elbow. While the man staggers, Inej races over lopsidedly and pushes the rifle into Kaz’s arms. He passes his cane to her and takes the gun.

“You’re hurt,” he says, quiet and intense. He barely looked at her for a breath, but he saw.

Inej ducks a punch from the man who’s still standing and slips around to his back, bracing her free arm across his throat as he’d tried to do to Kaz before. Speaking of Kaz, there’s a red line bleeding into his shirt where the knife must have nicked him. “So are you.”

Kaz rests the barrel of the gun against the man’s chest, though Inej is strangling him quite successfully. “A shame.” He turns his attention on their enemy; Inej takes the signal and lets up the pressure enough for the man to speak.

“What are you doing here?” Kaz asks, tipping his head to one side. His eyes are bleak and empty, his face peaceful. With Kaz, there is no calm before the storm; his calm *is* the storm.

The man stares back, half-dead but defiant. He looks familiar, too, Inej reflects.

“No job or bounty could pay you enough to get killed here,” she says in his ear. “It’s no use if you’re not alive to spend your share.”

“How do you know it’s a job?”

“It isn’t. Plenty of people hate us, but none enough to come this far,” says Kaz, spinning his cane in his hand and planting its tip against the earth. “But, honestly—as we all know, I’m an honest man—it makes no difference to me. I come out of this alive either way, and you don’t.”

“Where’s the kid?”

Inej’s grip across his throat tightens. The pain in her leg is forgotten. They’re here for Jordan? It no longer matters how they got here, or how they know—if Nina were here, Inej would make her raise the men so she can kill them over again. Anyone who thinks to touch her child deserves every death Inej has narrowly avoided and then some. She’ll spill their bodies over the sea with the name of the Wraith on their chests.

Kaz shifts the gun and makes a show of aiming. “Have I made a mistake? Seems like you think you’re still in a position to make demands.”

The man bares his teeth like some gruesome animal. “Nothing’s set in stone.”

“Oh, you’re already dead,” Inej murmurs from behind him. She is quiet and soothing in her fury. “Why do you think they sent a ghost and a demon to escort you?”

The man blanches. He’s got a wide, flat face—not ugly, just unremarkable. Swollen and off-color, now. “Shoot me already.”

“Don’t have to,” says Kaz with a broken-glass smile. “You heard her.”

“You have that kid, you have the Scourge of the Seas. We were just supposed to take out some old people if they got in the way, but hey, Ghost Captain’s a bonus prize.”

They know that Jordan is here. They know that Jordan is supposed to be with her parents. Inej has to fight down the urge to strangle him right there, or flick out one of her knives and cut the features from his face until there’s just a skull left behind. She is almost surprised by this feral feeling, but not repulsed by it anymore.

The man stays stubborn. That’s all right; if Kaz doesn’t break him, she will. “There’s good money in killing you.”

“There would be if it were possible.” Kaz’s face remains placid, but contrary to his words, his eyes are dead. Inej would know Dirtyhands anywhere, and this is the monster. The vindictive hunger in her is eager to see him burn this man’s life down, even if it has to be so quick as a bullet. “I was born in decay. I was brought to life by a corpse. If you tell the dead you’re alive enough times, you stop believing it too.”

The man doesn’t have time to scoff before Inej shifts her grip to his side and watches the blood spray.

She lets the body drop. She doesn’t whisper a prayer. For some truly evil men, killing them is its own penance.

They need to check on Jordan, to figure out how people still know where to find her, and yet she has to ask. “How much of it is true?” she asks, not looking at Kaz. “When you say those things?”

Kaz is already limping back towards the house. “Everything is true in one way or another.”

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej try again. They never stop fighting.

Chapter Notes

A bit late today, so I'm going to start right off with shout-outs~

wicked333, they are the definition of a power couple <3

AnimusLunari, I don't usually like writing action, but they make it so fun! Also, yes, Kaz learning a little bit of Suli came to me in the moment and I really liked it <3

andyoudoctor, I'm sorry for whatever you're dealing with IRL! Glad I could give you some respite, though :D

StarryEyedCreator, feral Kanej is best Kanej, and that's the moral of this chapter!

Cherokee, that's what they call a plot twist, babey :D

lilieswho, you're not the worst reader; in fact, you are a wonderful reader, because you give me so many cool ideas!

hardly_a_ghost, every time I see a comment my eyes light up ;) and YES to dark protective streaks!

Happy_Hudson, dramatic Kaz is best Kaz!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej wastes no time in running into the house and bundling a wailing Jordan from her mother's arms into her own, pressing kisses over and over to the little girl's head. Kaz hangs back; this is not a scene he has a place in. It's clear, anyway, that they have overstayed their welcome.

The cut beneath his ribs still stings; it's not so deep as the one still healing on his back, but still a nuisance. Not to mention the result of a slow response on his part. At least a proper fight assured him that he's not gone so soft as he feared, but he'll still have catching up to do once he makes it back to the city.

And he *is* going back. All thoughts of mornings and windowsills, clever fingers against his palm, the what-might-have-been that doesn't matter because it's not *real* —they've faded like the dream they are. He'll let Inej make her choices, but he already knows what they will be. He'll keep his promise, but whatever they've made here was not meant to last.

He takes a slow step towards the family, where Inej is clasping her parents' hands; everyone is wiping each other's tears, murmuring quick and low in Suli while Kaz stands at a distance. They are busy comforting each other, as they should be.

Jordan, however, squirms down from her mother's—from Inej's grasp, Kaz corrects himself sternly. Well, maybe it's not wrong. He saw the look in his Wraith's eyes as soon as a threat to Jordan was mentioned. He heard the low, black bite in her voice. He could never afford it, but it seems that allowing herself to feel and be connected has made Inej *more* dangerous.

Jordan toddles over to him and looks up at him, her thumb firmly planted in her mouth and tears still smudging her face. Kaz sighs heavily. She's just going to keep looking at him unless he does something—and so will Inej, once she notices.

Carefully, he sinks onto the nearest low ottoman and leans his cane against his knee, his leg complaining as he does. Jordan scrambles up beside him, and he has to fight not to hold his breath.

"Are you scared?" he asks quietly. It's a stupid question; obviously, she's scared, and he supposes that with an optimistic view of things, she should be, but Kaz has been a realist for as long as he can remember. He also never learned how to talk to children when he doesn't want something from them.

Jordan, however, just nods; she pulls her thumb from her mouth and scrubs at the tears on her cheeks. "Bad men?" she says.

"Not anymore," says Kaz, keenly aware of the way that he can feel her beside him.

"Bad men take Mama One," says Jordan. Her Kerch has improved over this trip. "Bad men take Mama Two?"

"She's still here," says Kaz, and if he believed in gods or Saints he'd thank them for it. "You've both had your share of bad men. Even me."

"You bad man?" Jordan asks, looking like she's going to cry again. Some people would say it's too much for her to understand, but Kaz isn't interested in lying to her. He won't see her much after this, anyway.

"Yes," he says. "But not to you."

Jordan kicks her little bare feet against the side of the ottoman before seemingly deciding that this suits her. She squirms sideways and curls more closely against Kaz; he grips the head of his cane, hard, fighting down the way that his heart wants to hammer out of control. It's a small weight, it's on the one side, it's not everywhere, not cold, *not the bodies*—

He'd turned away that voice, hadn't he? *Watch me live?* Now, though, it's all he can do to hold still and keep his mind here instead of back on the Reaper's Barge.

But it's a Jordan beside him, Jordan's weight against him, and it connects to nothing else except that he can't stop thinking of that name, of the give of his brother's rotting flesh under his hands. His breathing is rising now, getting shallow, because he's drowning, because he can't do this anymore, and now the distant dream is even less than that.

I was born in decay. I was brought to life by a corpse.

Why did he say that? It's too fresh in his mind now. It's all he can see. The water is filling his lungs, killing the voice that wants to scream *I'm alive.*

Abruptly, he stands, bracing himself with his cane, and strides down the hall to the bedroom.

Maybe he hears Jordan start to cry behind him. Or maybe that's just the waves of the harbor.

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It's a blessing and a curse to be able to feel her presence.

Kaz is sitting on the end of the bed, his back to the door. His hands, safely gloved—but what difference does it make, really?—are in fists against his knees. He knows Inej is behind him, but he doesn't move. He can't. He can't see her face, not when he knows what she's thinking anyway, what they're all thinking.

"We need to leave," he says brusquely. "Tomorrow if not by the end of the day."

"I don't disagree." He can't read anything from her voice. He finally turns around. She's got a roll of bandages in her hand and a tin of some kind of salve. There's a dark line on the leg of her trousers that he noticed before, that must be blood. "First," she says, "Mama gave me these."

Kaz feels cold. He's not ready to do this again, to try and fail and be helpless again. He doesn't say anything. He can't.

"You're hurt too," says Inej, taking a step into the room.

"And I'll handle it."

"I have bad days, too," says Inej, more quickly than she usually responds to his cold avoidance. She sits on the bed, too, but up by its head, a good three or four feet away from him. "Don't set your precedents on them."

"By which you mean?"

"You know as well as I do that there have been days when I barely left my room, Kaz. I never said that it would always be like that. I waited until it wasn't."

“Then wait now,” he says, flattening his hands out against his knees. They’re shaking. Usually a fight makes him feel powerful, stops him from feeling like this. It was simpler when he was both the threatened and the threat.

“As long as you actually want me to wait and not to stop trying,” says Inej, shooting him a glance before rolling up the leg of her trousers. There’s a graze on the side of her calf—not deep, but probably painful. It should be nothing after getting stabbed, Kaz reflects grimly. At least then he could carry her.

He pulls the hem of his shirt loose and undoes the bottom buttons, up to where the cut is. When he looks over at Inej, she’s dabbing two fingers in the salve and spreading it over the graze, grimacing slightly as she does.

“What’s that?” Kaz asks quietly, breaking the silence.

“It’ll clean the spot and help it heal,” says Inej. “I remember Mama making this when I was little. It stings, though.” She wrinkles her nose slightly, and Kaz almost has to look away, but she holds the tin out to him.

“Will you do it?” His voice is so quiet and rough that he can barely hear himself, but steady.

Inej pauses. “I thought you said—”

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, not looking at her. “Just…try.” If they’re going to part ways again after this…he doesn’t know why, but he feels as if he owes her this much.

Inej shifts to kneel on the floor in front of him instead of sitting beside him, which Kaz appreciates for reasons he doesn’t quite understand. As she did for herself, she dabs two fingers in the salve and holds them up.

Kaz nods, not trusting himself to speak. *Keep going.*

Slowly—achingly slowly—she brings her fingertips to the cut.

The first touch is the worst, and yet the sting almost makes him forget. Kaz bites out a curse, and Inej laughs shakily. “I told you,” she says, though she’s lifted her hand away now.

“Do the rest.”

Again she touches him, and again it stings, and again he fights back the urge to run or to strike. She’s not quite finished when he pulls back, or pushes her away—he’s not sure by now, with the past and the future mixing in his muddled thoughts. There are bodies, but this pain has to come from somewhere, and is he warm, cold, why is it all falling apart and what is it anyway—

“That will be enough.”

Inej is in front of him, holding up her hands, the tin sitting on her lap. “Barely enough, but I don’t need to do any more.”

If you wouldn't lecture me for it, I'd thank your Saints. All of him is shaking now, so badly that when she holds out the roll of bandages he can't take them. He shakes his head, breathing hard. He can barely be this close to her, and she's at least a foot away. He can barely be in the same room.

Inej doesn't question further. She returns to her place by the pillows, draws her leg up in front of her, and wraps the bandages around it while Kaz trembles and looks away, sickness crawling up his throat.

She passes the bandages to him when she's done, and he goes to work on his own cut, and yet —the shame he usually feels is less, now. He remembers those days, the days she talked about when she wouldn't, or couldn't, go into the Crow Club without going blank and vacant, vanishing to some place in herself that nobody could find. He heard the crying from her room, sometimes, on the bad nights. And he'd been cold and impatient, always expecting somehow that she would hide it and push through the way he had. Never again.

He turns towards her. He doesn't know what to say, but he wants the memory of her after this, of all that he could have been good enough for, maybe. She mirrors his action, curious and careful.

"Every captain knows that the sea has good days and bad days," she says. "It has a temper. But it carries me. It holds my ship. It gives me what I need to take my vengeance." Inej stands, and she is in profile to him now, facing the bed, the upturned set of her lips proud and certain, her eyes shadowed by the sun on her brow. "I love it in the shallows and the storms."

"Just—come back," says Kaz. Their shadows on the wall are bent close to one another, their silhouetted faces almost touching. In reality, he's still sitting on the bed, while she stands by its headboard, facing the window, but their shadows care nothing for depth. It's a wistful reflection. "However long it takes. Come back to Ketterdam." *Come back to me.*

"I will, and so will Jordan. I'm taking her with me," says Inej. Kaz was expecting it, and somehow he is proud, still.

"She'll be safe," he says, again in Suli, even if the language doesn't so much matter to Inej. This is something he can be certain of. Jordan will be safe with Inej.

"Look," says Inej, her eyes finding their silhouettes on the wall. "The sun is being good to us."

Kaz tilts his head up and watches their shadows kiss, wondering if he will ever know how it feels.

Chapter End Notes

special thanks to Cherokee for Inej's little monologue about how she loves Kaz like the sea! I loved the idea and it was fun to play with <3

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej learns about a mother's love. Jordan develops a scheming face.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Sorry for the late posting last time but I'm back with shout-outs~

Cherokee, thanks again for the inspiration! And yeah, you could say that Jordan's people instincts are either really good or really bad, XD

SweetShireBones, welcome, and thank you for your kind words! I love when people point out their favorite lines.

andyoudoctor, yeah, with everything that's happened to our boy, it's a huge step for him to even make an effort in any relationship—especially one he's still denying.

Wicked333, the ending is my favorite too!

Also, as you may have noticed, I started titling chapters with the POV character. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej feels like a reflection, sitting in her mother's chair and holding Jordan on her lap. She hums the notes she remembers of a song that still lives in her memories somewhere, a song about a child of the wind, a little girl who could fly. She'd always meant to ask Mama if she heard it somewhere or made it up. Maybe, that day the slavers first came, she would've finally gotten around to asking. Maybe it doesn't matter.

"Pretty," Jordan says in her little voice. She's been speaking more in Kerch recently, which is perhaps for the best, though Inej will make sure she doesn't forget her Suli. She herself never had someone to make sure she didn't lose her culture and herself, so she will be that person for Jordan. Her little girl will look beautiful in true, shimmering silks one day, and she will dance only for herself. Maybe she'll fight, too. Maybe both.

"You lie to your mama, bad girl," says Inej, stroking Jordan's downy black hair. "You know I can't sing."

"Sing," says Jordan sleepily, her eyes falling closed.

“I don’t think you’re listening to me,” Inej says with a soft laugh.

“I would get used to that,” says a warm voice in Suli. Inej looks up; Mama is standing by the window, watching her and Jordan with a wistful smile. “Daughters tend to have a mind of their own.”

“Oh, but not me,” Inej teases. “I was the perfect child.”

“You were the perfect child *because* of your spirit, my love.” Her mother comes over to stand by the chair and puts a hand on its headrest, looking down into Jordan’s round little face. “You loved living so much that you taught the rest of us how.”

“I wish I remembered.” Inej shifts Jordan’s weight in her arms. She knows that her mother is right, and yet she can’t imagine a time when she could simply love her existence as it was, without fearing for it or regretting parts of it.

“We will remember for you.” Mama kisses the crown of Inej’s head, as she herself has done to Jordan before. “And you will remember for her.”

Inej tilts her head up. “You knew I was going to keep her.”

Mama puts her hands on Inej’s shoulders from her position behind the chair. “I know your heart, my love. You love her as I love you. No one else could do better for her than that.”

“Oh, and so humble, aren’t we?” Inej teases, tipping her head back to meet her mother’s dark eyes.

“A mother’s love is not a thing to be proud of or to hide. It simply *is,* and it is indestructible. Perhaps no other kind of love is that way.” Mama sweeps Inej’s braid off of her shoulder and begins to unwind the strands with a well-practiced grasp.

Inej hums, letting her eyes slide closed. “I think that’s where people go wrong with love, is when they compare it and show it off. It isn’t like that.”

“No,” Mama agrees with an amused lilt in her voice. “I should say that you and Mr. Brekker even try to hide it.”

“Mama.” What else can she say? There’s no way to explain her and Kaz to her parents, the way that it grows and stretches and changes and strains. Their edges are too rough for things to happen the way that they should. There’s no agreement, no confessions and promises, no constant state; there’s only what they’re brave enough to handle, what they’re willing to try. They may never define what they are. They’re just…people. People who fight together, people who would kill or die for each other, people who hold hands sometimes. Is that love? Inej wouldn’t know.

And yet, even though she doesn’t know, she still thinks that she might love him. And if she doesn’t, if she can’t, there will be no one else for her—not really. Then she will love her ship and her work and her Saints, and her daughter. Her daughter, who has his brother’s name.

“I think,” her mother says slowly, spreading Inej’s now-loose hair over her shoulders, “that where people go wrong is with all their importance, their words and days and rules. Love should grow, like all of those flowers in the field, Inej. Sometimes it will falter. Sometimes, before the bud opens, you do not know how it will look. But it is beautiful in the end.”

Inej shakes her head, a smile still soft on her face. “The flowers die, Mama.” Maybe she has been spending too much time with Kaz.

“And some of them come back,” her mother replies, leaning against the back of the chair. “Spring after spring. Sometimes they are surprising, like you. We might never have expected you to come back, and here you are.”

“Not for much longer,” Inej muses, shifting Jordan’s weight in her arms. The little girl is asleep now, peaceful in a way that Inej can’t help but marvel at. How lovely it must be to know that you are safe.

“Ah, but you will come back,” says Mama. “The people that we love always draw us back to them sooner or later. Maybe that is the true test of it.”

“I will,” Inej promises, and it’s a promise she isn’t afraid of. “I don’t know how to be a mother. Maybe I’ll just come back for your help.”

“Nobody ever knows how to be a mother, Inej,” Mama replies. “You just love as hard as you can, and the rest will fall into place.”

“With a few bumps here and there,” Inej laughs softly.

“Always, my love. That’s the best way of learning things.”

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Inej recognizes the Kaz who greets her by the door to their room in pieces, but not as a whole. He is wearing his long, dark coat again, all crisp seams and pressed edges, with his cane in his gloved hand; and, yet, his hair is still loose and soft, his face still freckled and goldened. Inej feels as if she’s just meeting him, but she likes this boy.

He’s standing back from the door a bit, his hands folded on the head of his cane; Inej leans against the doorframe, her arms crossed, her face tilted up to him. “Ready?” she asks softly. “We’ll meet the ship by this evening.”

“Well, I’m quite sure that I have everything,” says Kaz, looking back over his shoulder.

“I’m not sure that’s what I meant,” Inej says with a gentle smile. “Jordan is with my parents. We have a minute.”

“For what?”

Inej drifts in the moment, and breathes. She is taking it for what it is, too much so to be frustrated with him. “Anything. I know we’ll be able to talk on the ship, but…”

Kaz's gaze turns out into the house, towards the sounds of Jordan's laughter down the hall. "Yes, I'm ready," he says. "Ketterdam can only go so long without me."

"It might lose its exciting reputation, at least," Inej teases gently. "Or regain some color. Imagine that." Personally, she wonders if what Kaz really means is that he can only go so long without Ketterdam. She is still discovering who she is without the city, and that was his world for much longer. Maybe he feels lost now, although it's hard to imagine Kaz ever not having a plan or an understanding of where he is.

"Perish the thought," Kaz replies drily. He seems to hesitate—seems to, Inej thinks, because it's a thing so unlike him—before saying, "I'd thought you might keep her."

"Jordan?"

Kaz nods, though halfway, as if he wants to pretend they could be talking about anything else. "It was a good call—to keep her," he says, and even though Inej has long been done waiting for his approval, she still feels a sight glow of pride. He's not one to freely hand out praise.

"Careful, now," Inej says with a light smile, resting the side of her head against the door frame. "That almost sounded nice."

He narrows his eyes, but without any real malice. "I'll rescind it if you start setting expectations."

"As someone said to me recently, perish the thought."

Kaz apparently elects to ignore her in favor of changing the subject, though not by much. "What changed your mind?"

Inej isn't sure why he's asking something that she's almost certain he already knows. It's not like Kaz to talk to anyone without a reason. Then again, maybe the boy in front of her is full of new surprises. "After those men came...I knew she would no longer be safe here," Inej confesses. "They came for her to get at me. They came because they knew she was my child, so I might as well make it so. I don't want to put my parents in danger with a life that is mine to choose."

"How noble of you," says Kaz with a crooked smile.

"It's not noble. It's just right," she replies. Maybe, once, she might have tried to convince him that she was not some haloed stained-glass figure, that she too was dark and dangerous. Now he knows what she is, and she knows the same. They've seen it all. It is his to take or leave. She can't ask him to remove his armor if she keeps her own, after all.

Kaz dips his head in assent. Inej briefly admires the way that his eyes catch the reflected, late sunlight more than she should. "How do you think they found us?" he asks, in a way that tells her that he at least has a theory, if he doesn't already know. He wants to hear her thoughts, and she's slightly embarrassed at the way that the idea warms her.

“They looked familiar,” she responds. “Could they have been from the crew that had Jordan? Maybe our prisoners escaped? They would at least know where the ship left us, and how many people of our descriptions would you find out here?”

“If they escaped, I expect it was messy,” says Kaz. “Might delay the ship meeting us. Or prevent it.”

“Between the two of us, I think we can figure something out,” Inej replies, arching an eyebrow, although the thought of some damage to her crew or her precious ship stirs something uneasy in her chest. “We’ve scraped through worse.”

“I expect you’d rather not have to,” Kaz guesses, stepping up to stand against the other side of the door frame. It puts them close, a foot or two apart. Inej finds that she doesn’t mind it.

“I’d rather not have to do many things,” she replies. “But this life of ours would demand it.”

“Ours?”

She’s prevented—or saved—from answering.

“Inej!”

Inej looks down, still surprised at the little voice using her name. It’s been a few days now of Jordan calling Kaz and Inej by their first names since she’s learned them, and Inej doesn’t complain. It doesn’t change her love, she knows, thinking of her conversation with her own mother.

She bends and scoops up the little girl. “What is it, my love?”

“Found you,” Jordan giggles, touching a clumsy hand to Inej’s cheek.

“So you did,” Inej laughs, though she turns her face away slightly. She knows it will disappoint Jordan, but somehow the press against her face makes her uneasy. “Is that all?”

Jordan nods, her eyes dark and serious. Inej glances over at Kaz. “I think she has your eyes.”

He frowns. “She isn’t actually—”

“I know,” says Inej, stepping up to his side with Jordan in her arms. “But, look.”

Kaz still looks skeptical, which is mostly just the irritated side of neutral, also known as his constant expression. This just encourages her. “If you insist.”

“What do you think about that?” Inej asks Jordan teasingly, shifting the little girl’s weight. Jordan tips her head to one side very seriously and stares into the distance. Inej bursts out laughing.

“What?” says Kaz, although there’s a shadow of a smile on his face at last, a softness around the edges of his eyes.

Inej beams at her little girl—who might just force Kaz into this family of theirs after all. These things are so simple when one is not quite three. “Scheming face,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who has an Instagram now! Hint: it’s me. The handle is @fairytales_of_forever if you’d like to come hang out over there (or, yknow, just click the link) <3

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz leaves. Inej comes back.

Chapter Notes

Feedback has been down overall the past few weeks, so thanks to those who still commented!

whynotcherries, hello!! I'm so glad you love Jordan! So does Kaz, which he is about to find out…

Cherokee, yes, as previously stated, he'll
figure it out eventually 🙃

andyoudoctor, I don't know why this is what I noticed, but that quote about a mother's love is one of my favorites from the chapter!

wicked333, she does have to be pretty cute to win even Kaz over, but of course she's doing it <3

alltheworldisinmyhead, thank you SO MUCH! That chapter was my chance to say what I've been thinking about the two of them all along.

lilieswho, I know I said this already, but I love the captain pun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz never expected to enjoy being surrounded by the sea, and yet it's somehow better when Inej is there. Sometimes he just...watches, while she climbs into the rigging or gives orders to her crew or stands at the railings, her face to the wind. The girl he taught her to be never took up space this way, although now he thinks that she always could have if she'd wanted to.

They're within sight of Ketterdam now. After everything it's put him through, Kaz is still something close to grateful at the sight of his city. This voyage has been smoother than the last; their start was indeed delayed, since the prisoners had, as Inej predicted, staged a riot and four of them escaped. As for the others, as Fionn, the Kaelish girl, had explained, there would be no need to worry about them. ("I think they'll find the sharks friendly after you two," she'd said in her amused lilt.)

Kaz hasn't needed to caution Inej against being blinded by relief; they both knew better. An enemy as great as the slave trade, which had become an institution in its own right, would rise to their challenge. Just because the last people who knew of Jordan's new parentage were dead, didn't mean that they weren't able to pass that news on after their escape.

For now, all remnants of that crew are gone, and Jordan is back to being a secret—now with a greater priority to stay that way. She does not seem to realize this.

"Might as well wean you off of it," says Kaz, taking his coat back from her for the umpteenth time. Unsurprisingly, she doesn't understand and starts fussing at him. Or maybe she *does* understand, and she prefers to complain anyway. Well, she'll grow out of it—he hopes.

(What's the point in hoping? They're within sight of the shore, and then she and Inej will be off again with no definite date to return. She could be a true child, a little person, the next time he sees her, and why should he care? Better not to.)

Good luck with that , says a voice that sounds more like Jordie than usual.

"Why?" Jordan asks in her small voice. She has grown enamored with that question recently. Kaz is told that it's a common thing for children, though he wouldn't know.

"I'm leaving," he says, as much to himself as to Jordan. He's leaning against the railing with most of his weight on his good leg, and she stands beside him, sticking a round little hand through the bars to catch the sea spray. Apparently her distress over his coat has been erased. What must it be like to just— *feel* things, without feeling as if emotions are a quantity to be preserved and not wasted?

"No leave," she says, and Kaz can't decide if she's telling him not to go or pointing out that there's nowhere *to* go, except perhaps over the rail. He's not sure which he would prefer, either.

"Soon," he replies, looking out at the skyline that's rising slowly from the horizon. The mist off of the harbor shifts in front of it as the wind changes, revealing a different city, it seems, with each glimpse that it offers. "But you'll be fine. You'll be safe."

"I be sad," says Jordan, and now he knows that she understands exactly what he's saying. It hits him, before he can dismiss it, the almost ludicrous thought that he's sending another Jordan out into the harbor, into the expanse of the True Sea, leaving him in the city. But he's not a child anymore. He is not the one in need of protecting. And he's not one for promises, but he'll keep his word to Inej.

You hunt them on the seas and I'll fight them in the city.

West Stave has been struggling recently, but they could bring about its downfall so much faster with his plans and power. If he can't protect Jordan, he can protect a legacy for her, for Inej. He will refuse to admit it until the bitter end, but Inej would say that she's drawn some good from him at last.

“You’ll be with Inej,” he reminds her, which means many things. And now he straightens and turns his face to the oncoming city; berth twenty-two is open, and Ketterdam doesn’t know what’s coming for it.

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When they get close to the docks, Kaz slips belowdecks; he’ll sneak off of the ship so that no nearby spiders or scouts see him near it. He tells himself that he’s gathering his things, but he knows that he’s just buying time, and that he’s not alone.

He closes the door on his makeshift cabin and sets his cane against the plank floor, moving back towards the stepladder that he hates, knowing he’ll be stopped.

“Another minute.”

Inej’s voice. He’s not surprised. She’d known he wouldn’t be.

“For you? Maybe even two,” he says.

“Kaz Brekker, the charmer.” She melts out of a shadow somewhere in his right periphery. Dressed in ivory and mauve, and she can still do that. Of course she can.

“I try,” he says, his eyes still on the ladder and the hatch above. He turns his head by a fraction to look at her.

“Hm,” she says. “That’s new.” She steps around on silent feet to face him, shadowed against the wall. The light from above gleams off of her single gold earring. “Like a lot of other things.”

“It had to be the right kind of change for this city,” says Kaz. “Some of it would get me killed.”

“You do plenty of things that *should* get you killed, Kaz,” she says, taking a careful step closer. “And does it make a difference if I like the change?”

“It should.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

He doesn’t reply. How can he? As much as he wants to be this person that Inej sees differently, he also wants to be alive and have something to show for it when she comes back. And yet, all the same, he doesn’t think that he could steel himself enough to bear that disappointment in her eyes just now.

“Don’t go back to the way you were,” she says. “Don’t be the boy that I left on the docks for the first time.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Kaz looks at the wall. He can’t look at her.

“I’ll miss your freckles.”

And now he can't help it. He turns to her, and her eyes are dark—dark pools, dying stars, lost planets, fresh ink, everything that means something to someone and especially to him. He's never been one for art or theatre beyond hiding his schemes, but the smile on her face is like the end of a tragedy—beautiful in a bitter way.

"You'll write," he says carefully, testing the waters—though for what, he isn't sure.

"Without a reason," says Inej, her smile softening.

He could do that. Maybe—maybe they *could* do that. Maybe he could just say things, to her. Maybe that would make them matter all by itself.

"When will you come back?" he asks.

"I don't know. But I will. Eventually I won't be able to help it, I think."

"Ketterdam has that way about it," says Kaz, thinking again of how he is about to return.

"I would say that you do," says Inej. She steps closer, and he looks at her, half in sunlight and half in shadow, and knows that this is all he will be able to do. He can't give her a kiss or an embrace or whisper rosy promises against her skin. But at least he can keep this memory with him, more vivid and valuable than a stolen painting, but taken with just as much secret and care—the picture of her. Dark and golden and filling the space like her presence fills him.

"You don't need something to remember me by," he says, stepping back. "Don't remember. Just come back, and meet me again."

"Don't be a stranger when I do," says Inej, and with a last look at him, she climbs up the ladder and disappears into the sun above.

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Kaz doesn't know what he's done to convince his people that they should go and start getting ideas, but whatever it was, he wishes he never did it. "We are not adding colored lights to the Silver Six."

Maikel, one of the newer Dregs—sixteen with a build plenty of fully-grown bruisers would be proud of and a fashion sense to rival Jesper's—pouts. "But a bunch of the other places have them!"

"The places we're better than, you mean?" Kaz asks impatiently, making his way out of the Slat. By *making his way,* what should probably be inferred is *storming through the path that clears for him, because people know better.* He used to hate having to push through crowds and would often go around them. As it turns out, practically running the Barrel his its benefits. "Have some self-respect."

"That sounded a bit too much like encouragement, boss," someone calls from one of the tables.

“I can cut your ears off and fix that problem.” It’s good to keep them on their toes. The old theory was always that a gang that felt like a family inspired loyalty, but to Kaz’s way of thinking, you let people joke around with the boss and they start thinking they can get away with things. Better to leave them wondering what’s banter and what’s a true threat, and anyone who knows him will err on the side of caution.

Then there’s Maikel, who is still following him. “Wouldn’t it attract attention?”

“If the fake jewels and the size of the place don’t do that, nothing will. Get big enough to start your own place and you can add all of the lights you want.”

Inej has taught him a handful of tricks for losing a tail, be they a true threat or just annoying, and he’s happy to make use of them now as he continues down toward the docks. Nobody else might be able to tell—except maybe Jesper, so it’s probably just as well that he’s not here—but there is an anticipation stirring in him that someone more easygoing might call excitement. Kaz is frustrated with Roeder on a regular basis, but when the spider brought news of the *Wraith* being sighted, Kaz was close to forgiving him everything.

Six months has seemed longer than it should. It was two years the last time, he keeps reminding himself. And why should it seem longer when he has her letters this time around, kept in a box beneath his desk? Their progress has been slow, but he did pull off a very successful raid of one of the houses on West Stave that brought two new Grisha into the Dregs—both Fabrikators. He’s held off on telling Wylan, but he suspects that the youngest member of the Merchant Council would leap at the chance to finally get Jesper some training, if the sharpshooter will finally agree to it.

On the way, he stops at a small, hidden stash and switches out his hat for one that more deeply shadows his face and his coat for a dark blue one. He wraps a faded scarf over his shoulders, and he’s decided to forgo his cane for this particular meeting. Even if he’s already doing this in relative secrecy, Kaz knows better than to assume that one can be too careful.

Finally, he reaches the stacked crates, from which he has a view of the ship. Is it his imagination, or do the people on the ship and the docks look more frantic than usual? He slips his hands into the pockets of the strange coat and slides his gloves off inside them, though he takes hold of the knife strapped to the inside of each pocket.

A dark shape is running up the docks, running like it’s—like she’s flying, in a way that Kaz knows. Directly at him. There’s something bundled in her arms.

He breaks out from behind the crates and walks down towards her; if she suddenly no longer cares for hiding their place, then he’ll preserve the secret for another time.

It is Inej, he sees as she gets closer—with Jordan in her arms. The little girl has grown some, and her hair is longer, but right now Inej is cradling her like a baby. Kaz quickens his pace, ignoring the way that his leg complains. “What—?”

Inej’s eyes are wide with fear. Kaz’s gaze finds Jordan’s face, sweat beaded on her little brow, her eyes squeezed painfully shut. His throat seems to close. He can’t do this again.

“Jordan’s sick,” Inej says. “We need help.”

Chapter End Notes

I posted a new one-shot this week; it’s an Inej songfic called “used to be mine” if you’d like to check it out! Also, I am on Instagram @fairytales_of_forever (link in the last chapter).

It’s trauma time, kids. Sorry-not-sorry for the cliffhanger ;)

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan is sick. Dirtyhands comes out to play. Kaz Rietveld hasn't forgotten and cannot forget.

Chapter Notes

tw: vomit, panic attacks, some gore/violence but about on level with the books

I know you're all eager to get past that cliffhanger, so let's do shout-outs~

wicked333, I can't help but torture this child, apparently.

alltheworldisinmyhead, or should I say Natalia, IT'S TRAUMA TIME BABEY

Happy_Hudson, it's my job to keep you guessing ;)

whynotcherries, this is why we don't read fanfic in class (I say while writing fanfic in class).

andyoudoctor, emotional rollercoasters are my specialty!

Cherokee, I said what I said >:)

PopcornIsDelicious, special shout-out to you for doing an ENTIRE BINGE READ and commenting on every chapter?? I love you people when you do this!!

Ketterdamned, their relationship development is so precious to me <3

bells_blakes, I am very proud to be an evil genius!

ImberArdeo, well, you make ME smile :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Get her to Jesper and Wylan’s,” Kaz says, barely looking at Jordan and Inej. “Use the tunnel from the Crow Club.”

“There’s a tunnel?” says Inej.

“Secret door in one of the private parlors,” says Kaz, and then he’s striding back towards the Slat, stealth and secrecy forgotten. She’ll find it.

He abandons his previous route, instead taking the quickest way, making use of some shortcuts that he’s found and some that Inej has shown him. On the way, he sheds the coat, hat, and scarf that he’d been using to blend in. He won’t have time to grab his own, or even his cane for that matter, but his gloves—those he puts back on. He feels so unhinged in this moment that one slip without them could bring it all crashing down.

He almost runs part of the way, and his bad leg is aching by the time he reaches the Slat, but that’s far enough down his list of priorities to be negligible. His mind is whirring, if for no other reason than to keep everything else at bay—the surging waters, the cold beneath him, the way that he has to fight to breathe. He needs to break something. He needs a decent fight to clear his head.

The best he can do now is slam open the door, making a handful of people who’ve been enjoying the afternoon calm too much jump. Good. They’re too soft, then.

“Where’s the medik?” he demands, his voice black and biting. He’s not afraid to be the monster now. Maybe that man could have saved his brother. And if not, maybe he can save another Jordan. He’s not about to lose his second chance.

They’re staring at him. What kind of idiots has he brought into his gang? He’s not afraid to gut them all and start over if he has to. “Where the *hell* is the medik?”

“A meeting. We knew it’d go sour, so you sent him—couple of Razorgulls. Should be back soon.” Trust Anika to keep her head. Though, he wonders how he must look if even she’s hesitating.

One of his younger scouts, one who apparently hasn’t learned, asks, “Why? Are you—?” Wrong question. Any question is the wrong question when what he wants is an answer. The kid walks up as if to, what, look him over?

“Don’t touch me.” Kaz didn’t leave the knives behind with the blue coat, and now he’s got one in his palm, the blade glinting between his fingers. He feels raw, wild, like he’s been flayed open and they can see inside of him, so he might as well make a bloody mess while he’s at it. “Where?” He should already know this, but he doesn’t have the time to try to remember.

At least the kid has guts enough to answer. Or brains enough to not ignore the knife. “That—that abandoned factory, where the—”

Kaz isn’t listening. He’s already out the door. That fight doesn’t need a medik—at least, they won’t until he gets there. And a fight is exactly what he’s itching for. He needs to remember that he’s not helpless. He’s not a lost child anymore. He’s a nightmare, with teeth that want sharpening.

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By the time he makes it to the factory, Kaz would be thanking Inej for her shortcuts if he could just *think* enough to do even that, but he can't, he can't think at all; he feels like he's treading water, and soon he'll get tired, soon he'll fail and sink and drown, but he has to use the time while he has it. Jordan needs him. He needs to remind himself that he is something terrible now, something with a fighting chance.

He stands with his back against a building, rough cold stone as an anchor behind him that grounds him where he is. He has a good, secluded view of the fight from here—Anika was right to predict that the meeting would go sour—and of their medik, Kerstan, sheltered behind a post with a pistol waiting in his hand in case he needs it. The Razorgulls are well-armed; looks like the Dregs weren't the only ones to expect that this would take a bad turn. Kaz follows the shadows up to Kerstan's side and leans as close to the man's ear as he can stand, though even still, his stomach knots and he pulls back as soon he's done speaking.

"You're done here. Get to the house in the Geldin district." Kerstan is one of few who will know what that means.

He turns his head halfway, enough to look at Kaz out of his periphery. "They need me—"

"They won't if there's no one left to fight," says Kaz, spinning the knife he's holding into his gloved palm.

"What happened?" Does everyone need to ask unimportant questions today? Kaz is going to have a *talk* with them about learning to follow orders if he doesn't lose his patience first.

"Ever mended a broken collarbone, Kerstan?"

"Once or twice. Is someone–"

"Want to practice on yourself?" Ghezen's sake, Kerstan finally takes the hint and scrambles past him, leaving Kaz to deal with the Razorgulls. Pim is leading the charge, plus Espen and Betje, two he's recruited within the last year, but they don't need to worry anymore. Dirtyhands has come out to play.

Kaz steps out from the sheltered spot with a cruel and crooked smile. "So you're the sorry skivs who've been testing our borders."

It's almost funny to watch them notice him, even though they don't stop fighting; even his own people look surprised, almost relieved. Pim raises an eyebrow in the breath between blows, but his questions can wait. All of them can wait. He doesn't need their help, and he plans to prove it.

He's is regretting not stopping for his cane, but that's all right; it'll be a challenge, less of a massacre. It'll be another legend for the mythos of Dirtyhands. By tonight the story will have grown and spread around the Barrel like a contagion, like—

For a moment, the knife shakes in Kaz's hand. Not like that. He's not going to think about that. He is not that boy now. And apparently he's not the only one who needs to remember.

Credit to the Razorgulls, they don't back down; there's no surrender in the Barrel, only fighting past the limit. Unfortunately, they'd be wiser in this case to forget that rule and run. There are four of them, maybe they're thinking. Decent odds.

Maybe that's why the first one comes at him, a stocky man who's armed with brass knuckles and throws a punch at Kaz's jaw. Kaz rides backwards with the movement and sticks his knife right under the man's ribs. He twists it for good measure, and the man's groan breaks into a scream before fading as he falls.

Around him, Pim and Betje have shrunk back to the role of support; Espen is already, Kaz suspects, on his way back to the Slat. Kaz is just as happy to not have help. He doesn't need them, and he wants to make sure that everyone knows it. He pulls his knife out and gets the dying man by the collar, giving his opponent's arm—or victim's, rather—a final twist out of its socket for good measure.

The next one has a dagger nearly the length of his forearm, but the size of your weapon doesn't matter as much as whether or not you know how to use it. Pim and Betje are holding off the remaining two, so Kaz can focus on this one. In the case of this man—skinny, but quick—he's focused too much on the front, leaving an opening for Kaz to get the knife in under his arm like the hero in a bad play. He could use this man as a meat shield between himself and the gun, but that would be too easy. Kaz swaps out his smaller knife for the dagger that's fallen to the ground.

Now one of them has a gun. They say not to bring a knife to a gun fight, but a gun in their hands is a gun he can steal, and sometimes the city is good to him. Sometimes Ketterdam offers up just what he needs.

Pim and Betje are trading blows with the one woman the Razorgulls have brought, who's putting up a pretty remarkable fight, but Kaz doesn't have time to be admiring his opponents when there's a gun on him. He's not about to trust that one of his people will notice. It's too much of a risk.

No smoke bombs to use now, and that would be too much of a shortcut anyways. He wants to see them suffer, to see the fear in their eyes that will bring him back to who he is and what he can do. He may not be able to dodge a bullet, but he can stop it from ever being fired.

The one he just stabbed staggers up and has another try at him. Kaz sees the gunman's finger twitch against the trigger, but a snap analysis says that he won't risk shooting another member of his gang. Kaz gets the injured one by the back of his collar and slashes the dagger across his throat, slamming its hilt into the back of his head for good measure. Instead of kicking the dying man down, though, Kaz throws him forward, towards the one still aiming at him; that second is enough for Kaz to catch hold of one of the gunman's wrists and twist sharply until he hears it snap.

If his opponent drops the gun, though, it'll go off on both of them, so Kaz is ready to catch it when it falls; he fires off two shots with surgical precision, one just beneath each of the man's cheekbones.

The last of the Razorgulls—a woman, armed with a spiked club—lunges at him in grief-stricken rage, with Pim and Betje holding her back. Kaz knows rage, but it only helps once you've fermented it into something potent. He feels mad and raw now, in a dangerous way that could slip from his own control any second, but he could do so much worse given time to make a plan.

"Let her," he says, twirling the gun like Jesper might do. Credit to his people, they listen; the woman charges at him like a bull, her face twisted with tears.

Kaz raises the pistol, looks her in the eye, and fires directly into her head. When she falls, Kaz turns away.

That's why you don't play the hero. There are no heroes, at least not in Ketterdam.

He thinks of Jordie, the brother he loves in the stunted way of something cut off and scarred over. He thinks of Jordan, the child who isn't his, the child he's wasting his time caring about, the child he can't save, and the way that knowledge tears something hot and wild loose inside of him. *No one to rescue you here.*

He's about to leave, but then he stops, crouches to the former gunman, and carves a smile from one gaping hole to the other with the tip of the stolen dagger. Now the dead man looks like a gruesome doll. *That's the only kind of happiness I can offer anyone. I don't make promises in this life, but at least when you're dead I'll carve you a smile.*

Pim and Betje are still behind him. He doesn't hear either one of them gasp or gag—good, he'd expect better—but he can imagine the looks on their faces. That story will be circulating the Barrel by tonight, another legend for his armor.

Kaz rises and swipes his hands together. His gloves are slick and stained, though it's hard to tell against the black leather.

Better blood than water, Kaz thinks.

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By the time he makes it to Jesper and Wylan's, the medik has beaten him there by a good bit. Good. He's done what he can, so now he can get this over with and get out. He needs to be alone, and he needs it about ten minutes ago.

Wylan meets him at the base of the grand main stairs. "They're upstairs," he says, trying and failing to hide some concern. "Why are you covered in blood?"

"Not my blood."

"Not the question."

"Maybe you need a refresher on how and when to argue with me, merchling," says Kaz, already on his way up the stairs. His leg is screaming, but to hell with that. "By the way, you don't."

“Good to see you too,” Wylan mutters. Kaz ignores him.

Inej meets him once he’s finally limped his way up the stairs. Her face is haloed by loose, wispy hairs, her brow set and determined. He can’t even take in the sight of her. It’s too much. It’s all too much.

“She’s in there,” says Inej, tipping her head towards one of the doors, from which Kerstan quietly emerges and stands back a bit from them. She glances over him. “What happened?”

“Had to clean up a fight,” Kaz says brusquely. His eyes dart to the door and back to Inej. He doesn’t know if he wants to go in there, but he *needs* to go in.

“She’s asleep,” Kerstan offers. “Her fever hasn’t broken yet, but keep giving her that medicine and her odds will be good.”

This should let Kaz relax. Somehow, it doesn’t. His hands are shaking, and he doesn’t have pockets to shove them into, so he curls them into fists. He looks back at Inej again, willing her to say something, to make the choice for him; he needs to get out of here, to be anywhere else, but he needs to be in that room just as badly.

“Go on,” Inej says softly. He can’t get a read on her beyond her words. “Even asleep, I think it would be good for Jordan.”

Somehow, the sound of the name makes his heart stutter. The part of him that’s trapped somewhere in the past raises its head at the sound, and he has to wrestle it down. He nods sharply, turns, and limps into the room.

There’s a polished nightstand, a door to an adjoining bathroom, a four-poster bed. Maybe it’s the size of the bed, but Jordan looks so...small. Her little face is twisted into a grimace, and she keeps shifting in her sleep. Kaz slips his gloves off; she doesn’t need to be marked by the blood he’s shed on her behalf.

He inches closer. *This is ridiculous* , he tells himself sharply; *what are you afraid of?* But he’s hanging on by so very little now. Anything could be too much.

Why, then, does he reach out a hand towards her? To feel her fever, to show her he’s there? It doesn’t matter, anyway. He barely gets close enough to feel the heat.

He makes for the adjoining bathroom as fast as he can manage, his hands shaking so badly that he nearly gives up on the handle and just breaks the door in. Why now? Why that? Why did he even try it? He has the half-lucid thought that normally he can finesse any lock, and here he is wrestling with an unlocked doorknob. But maybe Kaz doesn’t know that man who can solve anything. Maybe he’s just trembling on the tiles now. It’s a miracle that he remembers to lock the door behind him.

He lurches over and vomits into the basin, heat and bile stinging his throat; his whole body is shaking now, so much that he can barely hold himself up as he grips the basin’s edges. He staggers back from it and slides down against the wall, finally relieving his leg at least, all but

crashing to the cold tile, fighting for air. He can't breathe. Maybe he's finally dead. Maybe he'll be the one to get Jordie out of the harbor this time around.

He hears Jordan cough somewhere beyond him, and which Jordan it is doesn't really matter anymore, not when he's lost in limbo and his heart is racing so fast—too fast—too fast to think or breathe or realize that he's crying until the hot tears hit his lap or the ground.

He's crying. It's been years since he's cried. He gasps harder, but his chest feels too small, probably since his lungs are filled with water—or, wait, is he still sick? Where is he? *When* is he?

He jams a shaking hand against his mouth to muffle the sob that tears out of him and fights to breathe, because maybe if he could just breathe he could do something else after that and fix it all, but the air still won't come. Sweat is rolling down his neck, or maybe that's just water, or maybe it's from the fever? In any world, he's about to lose everything, and he can't remember why, but all he can seem to think is *not again, I can't do this again—*

He tries to wrestle his gloves back on, to salvage some thread of security, but his vision is blurred and his hands are shuddering so badly that he keeps dropping them. He can't even bite a curse through his teeth. He can't say anything. He can't save himself this time, let alone Jordan, or anyone else who's depending on him to *pull yourself together, Brekker—*

Should he count the furniture, or something? Has he tried that before? What is *before?* Basin, toilet, tiles, tiles, tiles. White and gold tiles, hotel bathroom, skin, corpses, harbor, Jordie, Jordan—

"Kaz?"

That's. That's his name. He knows that much. He still feels sick. He still can't breathe.

That's Inej's voice. He knows that, too. He can't answer her. He hates this sick weakness more than he's hated anything. He shuts his mouth and tries to muffle the gasping sobs that he knows she would hear.

"I know you're in there."

Kaz curls his hands in his lap and stares hard at them. He still can't say anything, but at least it's getting easier to fill his lungs now. The world is still spinning, and his gut clenches. Jordan is going to die, both of them, in every time, and he'll be standing by just trying to keep his head above water. His heart is going too fast. He needs to snap out of it, but he can't control anything, can't even control himself anymore—

"What happened?"

If only Kaz knew. He tries to say something, to make his throat work, but he can't get enough air in or out to speak. He splays his fingers out to feel the tension in the skin between them, the pull almost like pain, something to remind him that he's alive, but he can't hold on to the feeling. He needs to tell her that he hears her, somehow. He hesitates, then taps his fingertips clumsily against the cold floor—once, then again, louder.

“What can I do?” Bless Inej. He’d thank some god for making her if he’d thought she could be made.

What a fine pair we make—one too good to be created and one too broken to be destroyed.

Kaz finally forces himself to say something. “Keep talking,” he rasps, and he would wince if he wasn’t so utterly drained. His voice sounds terrible. She’ll know.

And so what if she does? whispers a voice that sounds like something Jordie might say. Idealistic fool that he was. Where did that ever get anyone?

“About what?”

He gets a decent breath, but he’s still trembling so badly that he can hear his elbows jittering against the wall. He swallows hard and forces himself to answer, to keep breathing. “Anything.”

“I could tell you about this one captain,” says Inej, says the voice that brought him back from the dark, the living hand that pulls him from the water.

Kaz tips his head back against the wall, and. And breathes. “Good,” he whispers. “That’s—that’s good.”

She probably didn’t hear him, but she keeps going anyway. “Well, when I startled him…”

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the longest chapter that I've done so far, and I've been looking forward to it for a long time, so be sure to comment your thoughts! <3

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan wakes up and doesn't want to be alone.

Chapter Notes

All I have for this chapter in my outline is “Jordan’s perspective. Make ‘em cry.” So do with that what you will.
Shout-outs~

Happy_Hudson, best way to make me think about you all week: compare my writing to the books <3

Wicked333, it won’t be an immediate recovery, but we’re headed that direction.

SweetShireBones, Kaz is definitely not known for his good coping mechanisms.

whynotcherries, I’m sorry, but if you’re having a breakdown I’ve done my job ;)

andyoudoctor, I’m so happy that you liked that quote!!

boybi_i, THANK YOU!! see previous comments on people comparing my writing to the books and how it makes me sob in a little author-shaped puddle on the floor.

kooookymon, yeah, Kaz is not exactly known for having healthy ways of dealing with his emotions.

R_umpel, I get way too much joy out of just breaking him and seeing what happens, honestly XD

Cherokee, thank you for your comment!! Lots of extremes in this chapter.

ImberArdeo, Kaz’s subconscious is a terrifying place, and there’s a lot going on in there.

PopcornisDelicious, that slow build was my favorite part of writing the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan wakes up in a very big bed in an even bigger room and does not like it at all. This is sort of a good sign, she thinks, because it means that she is really awake and not cold-forever-

asleep like Mama One. Mama One used to tell her that when people don't wake up anymore, like after getting sick or hurt or just plain old, they are in a happy place where they don't hurt anymore. But Jordan still hurts very much, and she is not happy, so at least she knows she's awake for real.

Maybe that's sad, though. If she were forever-asleep, she could see Mama One and get one more soft hug that made everything feel okay because Mamas weren't supposed to lie and when they said it would be okay, it would. But then, they never said anything about bad men or getting sick or going away even when they said they would always be *right here.* So maybe they did lie, after all. Maybe they knew how to pretend, just like Jordan.

She isn't on the Small Good Boat anymore—that much she can tell from the way that everything is staying still, although she doesn't like how it feels. It should be moving. But she isn't back in the big house with the yummy food and flowers, either. Wherever she is, she has never been here before, and she's alone, and she feels yucky. She isn't sure if she's shaking because she's cold, or scared, or both.

She is sleepy but too cold to sleep and too *ow* to get up and find another blanket and her throat hurts too much to call for help, so she does the best thing that she can and cries. When you are very small like Jordan, you have limited options.

She can't cry very loud because her throat hurts, but the door creaks open anyway, a sliver of yellow light coming through it to make a funny sort of triangle on the floor. Standing in the light is Mama Two, whose real name, Jordan knows now, is Inej; she comes up to the bed on quiet feet and sits next to Jordan, swiping some tears off of her face.

"You're awake," she says, and she sounds happy about that, which makes Jordan think that maybe things are a little bit okay, if Inej is happy.

"I cold," Jordan says through sniffles. "And *ow.* "

"I'll bet it hurts," Inej says softly, carding her fingers through Jordan's fluffy hair the way that she likes. It still isn't long enough to braid, but Jordan can't wait till it is. "You're burning up."

"No," Jordan says stubbornly, since she is very obviously burrowed into the blankets, "I cold."

"It would feel like that," Inej soothes. She is quiet for a little bit, just running her fingers through Jordan's hair, and Jordan doesn't mind. It's nice, until she thinks of a question. Sometimes people get better and then worse, she knows.

"I going to sleep...forever?" Jordan asks, because even if she's awake now, she's still sick, just like Mama One. And she knows what it's called, she just doesn't want to say it. She knows what being dead means. It's when people go away forever and ever, when they say they're going to stay and then they don't.

"No, love, no," says Inej, putting her arms around Jordan to help her sit up halfway, but she sounds scared and sad and lots of wrong things that Jordan never wanted to make her feel.

Now Jordan feels bad in even more ways. She wants to cry again, but that might make Inej sadder. “You’re going to be okay.”

“You not pretending?” Jordan asks, burying her face against the dark fabric of Inej’s clothes. Inej is smaller and not as soft as Mama One, but she is strong and warm and nice for hugging. Jordan would miss her, she thinks.

“No,” says Inej, laying down and holding Jordan against her chest. “I promise you’ll be okay.”

“Good,” says Jordan. “I want long hair.” And she has to be alive to have long hair, so.

“You will have beautiful, long hair,” says Inej in a gentle voice that makes Jordan sleepy. “Longer than mine. Maybe even longer than *my* mama’s.”

Jordan remembers that. That is very long. She would love her hair, if it was that long; she would braid it every day, or maybe make Inej braid it. Maybe she could even have some parts be long and some parts be short. Again, she says, “You not pretending?”

“I’m not,” says Inej, rubbing Jordan’s back in a way that makes it hurt a little less. It makes breathing easier, too. “I won’t, with you.”

“No pretending?” says Jordan. “Not even for games?”

“Well, maybe for games,” says Inej with her pretty laugh. The laugh washes over Jordan and fills her up inside like medicine. Maybe she will get better if she just keeps being funny enough.

It does occur to Jordan that she still doesn’t know where she is. The status of this question on her list of problems has gone down since at least Inej is here, but she still wants to know. She only remembers being on the Small Good Boat.

“Where?” she asks sleepily. She can’t look around the room, being far too comfortable in Inej’s arms, but she thinks that Inej will understand.

“We’re back in the city,” Inej says softly. “Do you remember that? Where we met Kaz and Jesper and Wylan?”

The other names, Jordan doesn’t remember, but Kaz she does. “Stick man? Kaz?”

“Yes, love.”

“Where Kaz?” She’s gotten better at saying his name now.

She isn’t sure why that makes Inej pause before she answers, but it does. “Just outside. Probably resting.”

“I see him?” Jordan asks. She tries to squirm enough to lift her head, but she can’t quite manage it and her muscles are still sore, and besides, the air outside of this hug is cold.

“Maybe in the morning,” says Inej, kissing the top of Jordan’s head. “Like I said, he’s probably resting now, like you should be.”

Jordan scowls. She doesn’t understand why, if Kaz is here, he’s not *here.* He was always all grumpy about her before, but not in a way where he really didn’t like her. And besides, she would really like his big warm coat right now.

“Coat?” she asks hopefully, having learned the word since she first tried to ask him.

Jordan feels Inej smile against the top of her head. “Patience. Right now, you need to sleep so you can get better.”

“No sleep,” says Jordan. “Cold.”

“I’m sure you are.” Inej pulls Jordan closer with the arm that’s looped over her back. “I’ll stay with you, okay? Then will you go to sleep?”

“You stay?” Jordan says quietly. “Promise?” And maybe even when Mamas make promises, they’re a sort of pretending—saying that something won’t happen when they can’t really stop it. Maybe they can’t do everything, after all. Maybe she should think that Inej is pretending now, too. But she doesn’t.

“I promise,” says Inej, and Jordan believes her.

Chapter End Notes

Last sad chapter for a while, I promise!! The next three are happy and then we’re going to do a couple of time-skips :D

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz tries to make things better, while pretending that isn't what he's doing.

Chapter Notes

I don’t have much to say at the top, so let’s get into shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, you are right in noticing that Jordan’s chapters at this point are a dichotomy of adorable and heartbreaking. That’s my formula since she is, at the end of the day, a precious kid who’s been through too much already.

alltheworldisinmyhead, there’s something about viewing tragedy through a child’s eyes that is so much sadder in its simplicity.

Wicked333, your wish is my command…;)

whynotcherries, thank you!!! The chapter accomplished its objective, then. ;)

hardly_a_ghost, we all want the best for Jordan (even me, but plot calls.)

curlyhairedkatniss, and hugs she shall get!

Gold_Vermillion, I’m so excited that you like my characterizations!! I worry a lot about those.

Cherokee, thank you!! We get some happiness this time around :D

PopcornisDelicious, Jordan deserves the world (and Kaz’s coat).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Inej wakes up to a warm body against hers, her heart stutters, and for a moment she forgets where she is. But the shape is too small and too warm; it’s only Jordan, she reminds herself sternly, and still fevered by the feel of it, though less so than the night before.

Carefully, with all the weightless grace of the Wraith, Inej lifts her arm from its hold on Jordan and rises, padding away from the bed on silent feet and opening the door without so much as a squeak of its hinges. As many ways as Inej’s past doesn’t do much for

motherhood, it comes in handy on occasion. One might never think to appreciate her skill set as it applies to sleeping toddlers, and yet.

She shuts the door behind her so that the early light, dim though it is, doesn't get into the room; the latch clicks silently into place with a soft press of her palm, and she steps out into the pool of yellow lantern-light that trails down the center of the hallway. Across from the railing that leads to the grand staircase, enormous paneled windows let in the pale light of the morning.

A few steps down from Jordan's door, Kaz sits on a chaise longue, looking much more out of place against the mauve upholstery than he usually might, with his loose hair and looser tie. His bad leg is stretched out in front of him, his head tipped back, but he's awake, his eyes deep and dull in the gray slats of light across his face. Inej perches on the end of the settee by his feet.

"How do you feel?" she asks softly.

His scowl at the ceiling deepens. "Fine."

"Like hell?" Inej translates, hooking her elbow over the back of the chaise.

Kaz gives a hollow laugh. "That's an insult to hell."

Inej rests her chin on her arm. "That bad?"

"Don't make me say it twice."

Inej has to smile a bit at that. Normally, Kaz would make every effort to avoid being honest about his well-being—and even now, if he'll admit that it's bad, she has to wonder just how bad that is.

Kaz still seems wary of getting close to anyone; since he eventually emerged from the en-suite to Jordan's room, he's been keeping more distance than usual, so Inej has her legs folded under her and her body clear of his, fabric or no fabric. She knows only disconnected pieces of what's made him so afraid, but this isn't a time to ask. Not many things scare Kaz Brekker, after all.

"Didn't sleep?" she asks. He never seems to develop the tell-tale dark circles beneath his eyes, as if nature has just given up on trying to remind him to rest. Still, she's certain he hasn't slept much, if at all; she would know that bad days are usually followed by bad nights.

"Couldn't, he says roughly. His hand goes to his knee, pressing and kneading there—and maybe it's almost involuntary, but Kaz is usually so conscious of these things that Inej takes it as a deliberate act of trust. "Between this and the—couldn't," he cuts himself off.

Nightmares, Inej suspects, being familiar with them herself. She sees his free hand go to grip the head of his cane, almost like a comfort. She'd gone to get it and a fresh shirt for him from the Slat, late the night before; Kerstan had ousted them from the room so that he would work,

and she preferred to be doing something useful rather than endlessly pacing the hallway, wearing tracks in the carpet.

She can't shake the feeling that it's her fault, somehow. If there someone else to blame, someone who dared to harm her child, she would be making them beg for death and then denying them its release. But there isn't—there's no one to blame, unless she wasn't careful enough, unless she missed the signs, unless there was some way she should have been protecting Jordan that a girl of not yet twenty wouldn't know.

Kaz's dark eyes trail down to the door behind which Jordan sleeps. "You were in there," he says carefully. He shifts back to sit up a bit more, scowling more than wincing as it jostles his leg.

Inej waits. "I was."

Kaz rubs harder against his knee, staring down as if it's personally attacked him. His shoulders tense and then fall. "How—how is she?"

Inej's smile breaks into something full and true. It seems so little to ask, for him to care, but for *him* , it's enormous. "Still fevered, but it's getting lower," Inej replies. "She was awake for a bit last night. She asked to see you."

Kaz arches a skeptical eyebrow.

Inej tips her head to the side in exasperation. "You really think I'd lie about that?"

Kaz shrugs dismissively, but he's looking away; if Inej didn't know better, she'd say he seems flustered. Well, maybe she doesn't know better, after all.

"If she isn't awake now, she will be soon," says Inej. "Do you want to go see her?"

"Well, she probably won't stop bothering you until I do," he says, trying very hard to sound annoyed.

"Well, thank you for worrying for me," says Inej, rising with a smirk. Maybe he didn't realize that there wasn't a way to make a selfish excuse just there.

Kaz glares at her, but it's a softened version of his usual scowl. It deepens into a wince as he slowly turns forward and stands, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Go on," he says, sounding irritated. "I'm not the one who needs a nursemaid."

Normally, Inej would snip back at him, but just now she'll allow him his pride. She doesn't need to add insult to injury. So she goes on ahead, quiet as before, hearing his cane muffled against the carpet behind her.

When Inej cracks the door open and steps into the room, Jordan is still sleeping on the bed, a little lump of blankets, but she's beginning to stir. Inej goes to sit beside her, curling half-upright against the pillows and holding Jordan close to her.

Jordan blinks a few times and squints in the low light. “Mama?” she asks, clutching automatically at Inej.

“I’m—I’m here,” says Inej, wrapping her arms around Jordan. *You’ve never called me that before.*

“You stay,” says Jordan, relief evident in her small voice. She wriggles her torso half-onto Inej, dragging the blanket with her.

“I promised,” says Inej, rubbing the little girl’s back. “And you know who else is here?”

Jordan squirms to lift her head, just as Kaz opens the door with rather less grace or silence than Inej had. He looks warily at her and doesn’t close the door, standing in front of it instead, looking—and Inej would have never thought it possible—awkward.

Jordan, however, looks more alive than she has in days. Her eyes light up and she wriggles in Inej’s grasp. “Kaz! Stick man!”

“Stick man indeed,” says Kaz, tapping two fingers against the head of his cane, on which he’s putting a lot of weight. Inej is paying less attention to that, however, than to the fact that he’s almost smiling—the ghost of something tired and soft-edged and warm playing around his lips.

“People aren’t usually so excited to see you,” Inej teases, sitting up and shifting Jordan so that she can sit against the cradle of Inej’s body.

“Neither should they be,” says Kaz, but nonetheless he limps up to the side of the bed and stands perhaps a foot away.

Jordan stretches her arms out to Kaz and makes grabby hands at him. He goes still and his eyes flicker to Inej, not quite betraying panic but dangerously close.

“You don’t want to get Kaz sick, do you?” asks Inej, giving Jordan a squeeze. “Maybe hugs can come later, but you have to get better first, okay?”

Jordan chooses to sulk in favor of answering. This is hampered by the fact that she looks absurdly adorable, swaddled in blankets with her arms crossed and her little pouty face.

“A compromise,” Kaz suggests, one brow raised theatrically in his showman’s manner. He lifts one hand off of his cane and shakes out his sleeve as if to make sure that the cuff is crisp and properly wrinkle-free. Jordan watches him, wide-eyed.

Kaz shuffles a step closer, reaches out, and snaps his gloved hand three times by Jordan’s ear. She tries to turn to look at his hand, but he sweeps it around behind her ear and flicks it upward, revealing a coin grasped between his fingers. Jordan laughs and laughs, clapping her hands as she rocks back and forth in Inej’s arms.

And Inej? She *beams*. He’d promised that he wouldn’t go back to the boy she left on the docks. She still remembers telling him that having bad days means figuring out how to go on, not giving up on trying. And he *has* .

Somehow, she'd been afraid yesterday, when he was as cold and brusque as ever, brushing her off with barely enough information to go on. When she'd hunted him down to the en-suite, when she'd finally coaxed open the door and found him sitting on the ground, tear-streaked and wild-eyed, when he'd flinched away from even the suggestion of her touch, she didn't know what to make of him. She'd thought that maybe anything they had fought for was lost, again.

But here he is—admitting his pain, if begrudgingly so; looking awkward, worried, tired, happy; making Jordan feel better in a way that he can't rationalize aside, and they both know it.

As for Jordan, her pain and tiredness seem all but forgotten; she claps her hands and squeals, giggling with delight at the magic. It means more than Inej can say to hear that laugh from the little girl who talked last night so fearfully and with too much knowledge of death. It's not too late for Jordan. It might be too late for them, but for her little girl—dares she say, for *their* little girl—there is still time to have the kind of joy in life that she deserves.

Kaz drops the coin into Jordan's hands and meets Inej's eyes; she's almost afraid to say it, but she might dare to think that she finds hope there.

Ridiculously, Inej wants to cry or kiss him or something equally foolish. Maybe that will be for another time. She's pretty sure that there are tears in her eyes anyway when she meets his gaze and mouths, " *Thank you."*

Chapter End Notes

please leave a comment if you liked it! they give me motivation AND you get a cool shout-out <3

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz accepts his fate. Fate, in this case, has taken the shape of a toddler.

Chapter Notes

I am SO sorry for the late update. My routine got all screwed up yesterday and this story got lost. Please accept some family fluff as my apology (and some shout-outs~)

Wicked333, I was a little on the fence about it, so I'm glad you liked that quote!

hardly_a_ghost, if it helps, I've been thinking about your comment all week <3

Adore_reading, all the hearts for you!

BrilliantOmega, I had fun writing it!

andyoudoctor, I will keep coming back to the tenative balance and boundless understanding that is their relationship, so I'm glad you like that quote!

whynotcherries, they say that little kids have a good sense about people, although whether or not that applies to Jordan depends on who you ask XD

Happy_Hudson, I'm glad you liked it! They deserved some happiness.

Cherokee, we have now entered the "happy tears" portion of this segment ;)

ImberArdeo, that's slowburn found family for you :D

eekabee, I'm happy you're enjoying it so far! I hope you stick around <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz finds himself at the house on the Geldstraat for the third evening in a row and almost turns right back to the Slat. The Crow Club will be ramping up into its busiest hours soon; he could go back and observe the counters, the dealers, the players, keep an eye on business. It would be more productive than this. The Dregs aren't much bothered by his leaving for the night, but if he keeps doing this, his Crows might start to think he likes them.

Perish the thought, says a voice in the back of his mind that sounds suspiciously like Inej.

Welcome to the party. He's got enough voices in his head by now that he might as well add a voice of reason to the mix.

Kaz leans on his cane and glares balefully at the door for several seconds before limping up the stairs and letting the knocker fall. Look at him—going in through the front door and *knocking,* for Ghezen's sake. This is ridiculous. He should at least pick the lock. But if he does that, Wylan will be giving him vaguely disappointed looks all evening, which is quite possibly more trouble than it's worth.

Frankly, it's insulting. He knows better than to damage the lock. They're not *that* difficult to crack by the look of them (and really, former members of his crew should know to put better security measures on their house).

Kaz is still sulking somewhat about this when a maid he thinks he's seen before opens the door with a cheery smile that grows slightly forced when she sees him. "They'll be thrilled that you've come," she says, her cheeks round and red as apples, and swings the door open with rather excessive flair.

"I'm sure," Kaz rasps drily, stepping past her into the foyer. His eyes trail up to the ceiling. *Looks like real gold designs on the crown moulding,* he mused. *If I could get Inej up there, theoretically, I could—*

"May I take your coat, sir?" The maid is still smiling obnoxiously at him.

Kaz glances over her. "No."

He continues down the carpeted foyer until he's a few paces from the end, whereupon Jesper pokes his head in and beams brilliantly. Kaz is getting a little annoyed with how happy everyone is to see him. Not to mention that Jesper looks like one of those new paintings out of the Southern Colonies—colorful and blurry, with human figures who look like ribbons or rubber toys.

"I knew he would come!" Jesper proclaims, bounding over to Kaz in about a step and a half. The former sharpshooter knows better than to sling an arm around his shoulders, and yet Kaz finds himself stiffening and shifting away when Jesper and all of his energy gets close.

"If you're going to be like this all night, I'll leave," Kaz mutters, but he follows Jesper into one of the many parlors anyway.

At first glance, it appears as if none of the furniture in the room matches; however, when surveyed with the careful eye of one who appreciates (and appropriates) fine craftsmanship, it reveals itself to have similar whimsical lines and patterns in the thankfully subtle upholstery. "You've redecorated."

"Apologies," says Jesper. "We know you're allergic to color. We can always step outside if it gets life-threatening."

Kaz and Wylan collectively ignore him. "You were here yesterday," says Wylan from his high-backed chair by the roaring fire. "You know how the furniture looks."

“So much for my attempt to be charming.”

“That was an attempt?”

Jesper stands at the back of an elegant couch, his hands drumming on the polished wood frame. The piece is worth at least 12,000 *kruge,* easy. Inej would say it’s bad form to appraise his hosts’ furniture for hypothetical thieving situations, but Kaz will just add this to the list of ‘Things that happen in my head which Inej is better off not knowing’.

Speaking of Inej, where is she? Not that Kaz will be particularly stricken, of course, but he would be annoyed—well, maybe upset—fine, *hurt* if she left without telling him. He finally enters the room, but deigns to stand beside one of the chairs rather than actually taking a seat, his posture arranged in impatient nonchalance, one hand resting on the chair’s back.

“Inej should be right down,” Wylan says, hopefully realizing the absence rather than understanding Kaz’s thoughts. He wants the merchling in his head even less than he wants Inej there. “She was going to get Jordan, I think, but they’re—”

“Here,” says a voice from the doorway. Kaz finds himself turning to face her, drawn to that voice, and at the first sight of her something in him raises its head—wakes up, resets, stands at attention and then in awe—as it always does.

She’s got her hair in a neat braided knot at the base of her neck, the firelight gleaming off of her single earring. She’s wearing one of her quilted vests over a loose, faded white blouse and is balancing Jordan on her hip. There’s a smile in her eyes beneath the full sweep of her dark lashes. Kaz grips the back of the chair a little harder.

“And look who else is here,” she says, turning her face to Jordan. The little girl lifts her head from its place on her mother’s shoulder and squeals. “Kaz!”

He fights to keep his face impassive. “Yes, hello, Jordan.”

Inej strolls over and takes the chair he’s standing next to. Without thinking much about it, Kaz takes the seat beside hers.

“Jordan gets a proper greeting?” Jesper gasps, falling onto the couch. “Unfair.”

“She has more manners than the rest of you combined,” says Kaz, unable to keep himself entirely from giving Jordan an amused look, especially when her reaction to this comment is to look utterly offended.

“Even me?” Inej teases, propping her chin up on her elbow and lowering her lashes in mischief. It’s impossibly mesmerizing.

“I don’t think it’s acceptable in proper society to say hello with one’s knives, Wraith,” says Kaz with an amused tilt to his lips. This chair is far too comfortable. He might just say to hell with not stealing from associates and sneak it back to the Slat with him.

“I hate to admit it, but he’s right,” Wylan chimes in. His hair looks vividly orange with the fire’s glow against it. “It’s not.”

“I didn’t say it was a compliment,” Kaz points out. “As Jordan has figured out before the rest of you.”

“She is clever,” Inej sighs heavily, shifting Jordan so that she’s facing Kaz’s chair. He shouldn’t be relieved to see that the color is back in the kid’s face, the light back in her eyes, but he is. “Too clever for her own good, honestly.”

Jesper and Wylan give each other a long and meaningful look. Kaz pins them with his glare like a dart. He knows that look was meant to be seen and is not about to give them the satisfaction.

“Think she might have a future as a criminal mastermind?” says Jesper, looking everywhere but at Kaz and Inej. “Join the family busine—okay, okay, okay.”

Kaz’s glare, having sharpened from a warning to a kill shot, is now firmly set in place and he intends to leave it that way.

“Speaking of family,” Inej says placatingly, curling into the plush velvet of her chair, “tell Kaz what you told me about Colm.”

“Oh.” Jesper looks uncertain for a second—running a hand over his head, fidgeting with his buttons, suddenly taking up much less space—but he meets Wylan’s eyes and then regains himself. “My da is coming to visit. Just a week or two, this winter—less to tend to on the farm, you know.”

Kaz, frankly, isn’t sure what to say to that. “ *Good”?* Well, he supposes it is, but he’d perform a baton twirling routine in front of a rival gang before he would say that. He hadn’t minded Colm, honestly. He’s a concerningly honest man as Kaz remembers him, but he also reminded Kaz of his own da more than he might’ve liked. He’s saved from answering, though, since Jordan speaks up.

“Da?” she questions, trying out the new word. She looks back to Inej for answers.

“It’s like ‘papa’,” Inej replies. “Another word for the same thing.”

Jordan groans and buries her face in Inej’s shoulder. “So many words,” she whines.

Inej laughs softly and pats Jordan’s back. Kaz almost smiles.

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After dinner, Jesper and Wylan are ahead of Inej, Jordan, and Kaz on their way back to the comfortable chairs and the fireplace, dancing to some imagined music as they go. Inej is hanging back, so Kaz takes his cue from her until at last she stops in the wide, high-ceilinged hallway and sets Jordan down. “Go on, love,” she says. “We’ll catch up.”

Jordan blinks a few times before nodding seriously and toddling off towards the door and the dance of shadows on the wall. Kaz expects she’ll be asleep by the time he and Inej catch up if the way she keeps rubbing her eyes is any indication.

He stands up straight, hands on the head of his cane, and looks at Inej with careful inquisitiveness. “What business, Inej?”

“Not so much business,” she admits, looking down with a soft laugh, but when she raises her eyes back to his they’re serious. “Can I ask you something?”

“Can’t answer that until I know what it is.”

She sweeps an imaginary strand of hair away from her face. “All right. When Jordan was sick at first, what was it...why were you so afraid? I’ve known—I’ve *felt* that kind of fear, but…”

“But no one touched me,” Kaz says softly, almost not believing it when he hears the words in his own voice. He thinks she must be able to hear his heart, as loudly as it’s pounding. She’s asking for another piece, another shard closer to the center of his brokenness, another block from the tower that could be the one to make it fall. And he knows what she wants the answer to be. She wants to hear that he cares about Jordan, that he found it in himself to fear for another human being enough that it could have cost him everything, but that’s not what he can tell her. Can he tell her anything?

Inej takes an unsteady breath. The lights are dim, low flames in the lanterns, and they make gold of the shadows on her skin that renders the moulding cheap in comparison. “Can you—will you tell me?”

Kaz’s breath trembles on his lips. He can’t make himself speak, somehow, but he can act. What did he do the last time? Sitting at her parents’ table, his gloved fingertips over hers? When he told her more than he had told anyone?

It might be entirely the wrong thing to do, but he peels off his gloves and shoves them into the pockets of his coat, his movements hasty so that he can get through them before he loses his nerve. He extends a hand to her, probably the boldest offer he’s ever made.

Inej can’t possibly understand what Kaz intends if he himself doesn’t, but to her credit, the Saint of a woman raises her hand to meet his, their palms sliding together, curves and ridges, his fingertips resting on her pulse. It’s the pulse that saves him. He holds on to the warmth of her, the throbbing under his touch, firm and not falling apart.

There they stand, hands linked, connecting them like a bridge, an impossibly fragile thread of strength. Kaz closes his eyes and forces himself to speak. He owes her this much. “You were there when I told Rollins what we lost. That we ended up without anything, anyone.”

“I was.” A second ago, it was impossible to look at her, and now that he hears her it’s impossible not to. Kaz opens his eyes and drinks in her face, warm and radiant and alive. He presses harder against her pulse, forcing himself to focus on the steady rhythm, and she doesn’t flinch.

He’s not sure what to say next, or even if he can say anything, but Inej speaks as if she understands. “That’s how he died? Starving, cold?” There’s an understanding in her eyes, but hard anger glimmering somewhere within. It’s a more righteous anger than Kaz will ever know. He’s lost his right to that.

“No.” His voice sounds even rougher than usual, all rasp, practically a whisper. “That was the year plague came to Ketterdam. The Queen’s Lady.”

“Kaz.” He hates the sadness in her voice and he hates it worse in her eyes. Her words aren’t pitying, but her brows are drawn together, her grip on his hand tighter; it must all make sense now—the rough rasp of his voice, the pitted, faded scars on his cheeks that could so easily be mistaken for acne scars. Something deep inside of him wants to tear away, to tell her to forget that he said anything.

“Don’t,” he forces out. “We both got sick. I just—I came back. And Jordie…”

“Her name,” Inej breathes. She rolls her shoulders back as if to steady herself, though Kaz can’t for the life of him fathom why. “Kaz,” she says, like she’s trying to draw him back to her, to anchor him as she has before.

But he’s staring at the floor now, his face twisted in anger and the horrible feeling of something worse, something hot and sticky and far too vulnerable for this. He grips the head of his cane with his free hand until it hurts, but the other is still gripping hers like a lifeline. He can’t let go. “It’s been long enough. By now it shouldn’t—I shouldn’t—”

Inej takes a step closer, pulling their joined hands down between them. “These things last,” she says insistently. “People will call them scars, but I think they’re more like...wounds with stitches.” Kaz remembers, clear as anything, the memory of her wearing his gloves, mending his wound when he didn’t deserve her help. “They’re not still bleeding,” Inej goes on, “but things can tear or break the stitches, and we can still do the wrong thing. We hope for them to scar so that they don’t hurt anymore.”

“And until then?” Kaz mutters, making himself look at her again. He sees everything that he has always treasured.

“We heal,” says Inej, shifting her hand so that his touch is fully against her pulse. “But that’s a choice we have to make, too, to do what we have to and get better.”

“Then I will.” It’s one of the quickest decisions he’s ever made. He’d said he wouldn’t come offering her promises, but he’s giving his word now and plans to keep it.

Inej smiles. No, she *beams.* It’s utterly radiant, golden and ethereal and *right.* Earning this feels better than 30 million *kruge.*

You’re beautiful. The thought is so overpowering that he almost says it out loud. But that isn't part of what they are, of this tentative golden balance, crows' feathers on a tipping scale that never did its job at justice. He doesn't know if it could be.

Inej releases his hand and starts forward, a lightness in her step. “Our friends are waiting.”

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When Kaz and Inej come back into the parlor, Jesper whoops with a careless upward fling of his hands. “Wine, whiskey, kvas for the daring, lady and gentleman?” he asks dramatically.

“I don’t know who you’re talking to,” says Kaz. “I’m no gentleman.”

“You’re not Kaz Brekker, either,” says Wylan, looking up in surprise. “Not with that smile.”

“I’m not smiling,” says Kaz, who might at least be *not scowling* but wouldn’t admit it at gunpoint.

“And I’m not the best dancer in Ketterdam,” Jesper scoffs from his position by the end table that’s apparently been converted into a makeshift drinks cart.

“Thank you for proving my point,” Kaz says smugly, resuming his previous seat. The fire is burning a bit lower, and the light in the room is warm and dim; shadows creep around its edges like old friends, making the room seem smaller. The firelight is low on his companions’ faces, on white-toothed smiles and glasses raised in toast, and something feels so unnervingly right about this that Kaz takes the moment to simply drink it in.

Jordan, to his surprise, has stayed stubbornly awake this long—something else that she’s picked up from him, Kaz notes rather grimly. She’s been sitting at the foot of his chair and now looks up to him, standing and taking hold of the chair’s plush arm. “Up,” she says stubbornly.

Kaz sighs. He glances over at the other three, and they’re clustered around the drinks—not paying attention. The chair is at least big enough that he wouldn’t be entirely holding her; it would be like back at Inej’s parents’. Where he failed before.

“Up,” Jordan whines.

He hears his own voice again, hears Inej talking about healing. *I will.*

“All right,” he says quietly. “Here.” He shifts over to make room for her. With a start, he realizes he still doesn’t have his gloves on.

He holds his breath without quite meaning to as Jordan crawls up beside him; she curls into the chair but puts her head against his chest. Hesitantly, his whole frame alert and jittery, Kaz lifts his arm, holding the flap of his coat, and puts it around her as carefully as he can. The coat keeps her skin separated from him.

He feels cold. The water threatens him again, the way that it always does, closing over his ankles and seeping in deeper. He shifts his shaking hand further up Jordan’s back until it rests over her shoulder and touches his fingers to her pulse.

She’s alive. She’s alive, and warm, and it’s all right, and he’s finally doing something right, and the craziest bit is? He’s alive, too.

“Da,” Jordan says sleepily, but as clear as anything he’s ever heard.

Kaz closes his eyes and tips his head back against the chair, her pulse still going under his fingertips. A real smile breaks over his face, unabashed and absurd.

Look, Jordie, I’m living.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to hear when I do dumb things like I just did, get hints at future chapters, and receive anything else that I might feel inspired to put on the internet, I'm on Instagram @fairytales_of_forever. If you'd like to chat, you can DM me over there or leave a comment here for a neat shout-out! I was a little worried about Kaz being too soft in this chapter but also loving it, so I'd love your thoughts—you all keep me going <3

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz follows Inej to the roof and reckons with the dangers of comfort.

Chapter Notes

You all are amazing and I have a bunch of shout-outs to do, so let's get to it~

hardly_a_ghost, thanks for the advice! Content warning for sweetness has been duly added ;)

stefaniegk, it's all about trying with them.

andyoudoctor, good on you for picking up the little hint in that first scene!

Cherokee, thank you! We all knew it was coming <3

Book_Junkie007 I'm quite proud of that last line, thank you :D

wicked333, he did not choose the child, the child chose him XD

Happy_Hudson, thanks for the reassurance <3

Searchingforwonderland13, I love binge readers with all of my heart! Thank you!!

alltheworldisinmyhead, yay for getting emotional over Kaz and at the same time rolling your eyes at him.

bookcrazyquotegirl, if it helps, I'm crying with you XD

whynotcherries, I am SO HAPPY that you liked that line!!

galeforcestorm3, I think it was indeed scream-worthy <3

YouGottaFlipItTurnWays, all the hearts!!

curlyhairedkatniss, thank you!! I'm very proud of that part!

eekabee, thank you so much! "kazually" planning to steal his friends' stuff just seems like something he would do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hours and the shadows alike have grown long, and the fire is low in the hearth. Some time ago, Jordan fell asleep against Kaz's chest, and now her pulse beats steady and slow beneath his touch. The fire is burning low and red, dimly illuminating the shapes of Jesper and Wylan asleep on the opposite couch; Kaz isn't sure how long they've been there, even though he's been staring into the hearth this whole time.

Inej sits in the chair beside him, curled up with her feet tucked beneath her and a long-empty glass in her hand. She, too, is staring into the faded orange glow of the fireplace, the shadows deep around her eyes and the light threading red through her hair. Kaz realizes he's been looking at her; he's not sure how long it's been, now.

He's amazed in a faintly aware kind of way that he's still here, that he's doing this; it must have been hours since Jordan has fallen asleep, and yet he's still here in the warm parlor—he's not drowning. There have been moments when it's gotten hard to breathe, when the world has blurred, when he would've gotten up and run but for fear of disturbing her. But he didn't. He has to keep all of his focus on the rhythm of her pulse, steady as the flaring and waning of a small candle in the dark, and he fears that if he gets much more tired his control will start slipping.

He keeps hearing her small voice in his head, calling him her da. A little comfort is a dangerous thing, he knows; he's been lulled by firelight and warm parlors and a sense of family before, and he's not lost so much of his sense as to forget that. Much like the choices that men make drunk and regret sober, he's not about to make a decision now that will bite him when reality crashes back onto his shoulders come morning.

"I should put her to bed," Inej muses quietly, tipping her head to look at him. She's even more beautiful in the half-sleep and half-light, fireglow hanging around her face like a fuzzy halo and a soft smile curving her lips like the crescent moon. The sound of her voice seems to awaken him even though he's been awake all this time.

She rises softly as a shadow and bends over him to scoop Jordan up, every motion so delicate that her fingers barely brush the buttons of his waistcoat. Still, Kaz holds his breath at the closeness of her, at the scent of salt and jasmine that wreaths them and the warmth of her body bent so close to his. She shifts Jordan into her arms, and the little girl fits against the cradle of her mother's body as easily as she had against Kaz.

"Come with me," says Inej, one hand on Jordan's back. She asked him that once before, in his office, only across the city but seemingly on the other side of the world. He hadn't even known about Jordan then. They have both changed. He's testing out a new person, trying him on for size. But no version of him can refuse her. So he nods, picks up his cane, and follows her to the staircase.

Kaz grimaces at the sight of all of those stairs; Inej, of course, ascends them like a sheet of silk, while he follows, gripping the banister tightly with the hand that isn't holding his cane. Inej slows for him. She might say that it's so she doesn't wake Jordan, try to salvage his pride—they could both say that and go on in the illusion. It's just that he knows better.

Finally, painfully, they make it up to the landing, and Jordan's room is only two doors down. Marya sleeps on the next floor—Kaz hasn't seen her this evening, but he knows from Inej that some days she stays in her room—but nonetheless he tries to keep quiet. Inej slips into Jordan's room and crosses to the four-poster, but Kaz remains by the door, watching as she tucks Jordan in and folds the coverlet around her. He's never seen Inej like this before. It should make sense that she would take to motherhood naturally, that her spirit which could never un-learn to care for others would know how to do this, but he'd never thought of it. It's not a joy that he can give her.

Once Jordan is settled, however, instead of coming back to the door, Inej crosses to the window. Kaz steps into the room, shutting the door softly behind him, and she looks at him with that crescent-moon sliver of a smile back on her face.

"Come with me," she whispers again, and the light in her eyes draws him forward as surely as anything.

Kaz crosses to the window, where Inej slides it open without a sound and hops up onto the sill. "Pass me your cane," she whispers.

Kaz sets his hands on the frame of the window. It's cold from the night air. "I haven't got your skill for scaling walls, Inej."

"You don't need it," she says. "It's a dormer, look." He passes his cane over, and once she's taken it, she steps out to the side of the window, onto the slope of the roof and out of sight.

Kaz knows dormer windows. They're windows built into the roof with little roofs of their own; deceptively easy-looking to get into, since you have to get onto the roof itself first and that's its own host of problems. Easy to get out of from the inside, though, even with one good leg. He sits backwards on the sill, then pulls himself up to standing and climbs up onto the little roof of the dormer, admittedly with less grace than Inej. He trusts her not to laugh at him for it. She grasps the edge of the dormer's roof, slides over, and closes the window with her foot, then starts up towards the slope.

Kaz has to half-crawl for purchase against the steep tiles, scowling slightly at Inej, who's walking up the slope of the roof like it's just another hill. He's going to be annoyed if she doesn't have a good reason for dragging him onto her territory.

Once they reach the crest of the roof with Kaz somewhat behind, he sees it's one of those types that has a flat channel along the ridge; typically used for water runoff, but handy in this case to sit on. He sits tentatively on the edge, lowering himself down after Inej passes his cane back to him. She sits beside him, her head tipped back, the golden line of her throat bared to the sky. Kaz has to wrestle down the overwhelming urge to press his lips to it.

Instead, he looks at his city. From up here, it looks strangely beautiful—the tangled mass of streets like a child's abandoned tatting, the lights of East Stave that are still alive at this hour, the streetlamps reflected in the canals. Behind him and Inej, he knows, if he looks he'll see the black slick of the harbor. But the harbor *is* behind him now, and so it ought to stay. One day he might even be brave enough to tell Inej what happened there.

“Jordan called me her da,” he says. The words ring in the silence like a bell in an empty cathedral. He dares to look at Inej after a long while, and she’s opened her eyes, but she’s looking straight ahead.

“Was she right?”

Wouldn’t he like to know. He knows what he would say if he answers now. He knows that’s the wrong thing to do. “I—I can’t say.”

Now Inej *is* looking at him. She draws one knee up to her chest with easy grace. “You don’t know, or you do and you won’t tell me?”

“I know what I want to say,” says Kaz, his eyes shifting back to the streets that raised him. The less he looks at her and everything that is impossible around her, the better off he’ll be. “And it isn’t what you think. But I can’t say things now. Not like this.”

“Not like what, Kaz?” There’s that note of frustration creeping into her tone, the one that would usually lead to her vanishing for hours in a sulk while he pretended that he wasn’t missing her.

“Everything feeling right. I know it isn’t going to stay like this. It can’t.” He squeezes his eyes shut, blocks out the dream. “Tell me it can’t, Inej. Talk me back to reason. *Please.* ”

“Not...exactly like this,” Inej says slowly. “But you can care and still be dangerous. You can be more dangerous for caring. I am.”

Kaz almost laughs. At least he can open his eyes now, and look at the few stars that are able to fight through the fog. Inej would probably give him some Suli proverb about light conquering the darkness, but it’s lost on him. Anyway, the city lights are blotting out the stars, too. “You’re a lot of things that I will never be, Inej.”

“You could be more than you think if you tried.” He forgets, sometimes, how stubborn she is. He looks over, and there’s that face that he used to love to cause, the little furrow between her black brows and the proud turn of her lips. He remembers why he liked it so much. “You’re working with me already, bringing evil men to justice,” she says. “That counts for something.”

He shakes his head and leans back against the ridge of the roof, shingles rough and cold against his hands. They’re still bare, he realizes. His gloves are still in his pockets, but they might as well be back in the parlor. “You’re my proof that there’s no justice in this world.”

Inej knows him too well to be hurt by his words just yet. She stretches one leg out like he does sometimes, resting her heel against the slope. “And how’s that?”

“If there were justice, if people got what they deserved, you never would have been put in my path,” Kaz says, his eyes on her, not on the sky or the faded, crescent moon or the city below them. Why would he settle, when he can look at her? “I made myself deserve you. I didn’t wait for someone to decide that I did. I was never going to be a good man, but you’re worth being a better one.”

This isn’t a time for a kiss or an embrace—shallow, temporary passions, anyway. There’s something about the yellow moonlight in her eyes that’s both the gold and the fire that tests it. “I know. I see you.”

This feels more insane and impossible than anything he’s ever tried. He has the feeling that maybe, if he stepped over the roof’s edge, he might find that he has black wings to blot out the stars. “Just don’t stop.”

Chapter End Notes

We are about to do a short time skip, say hello to Colm, and then start doing longer jumps. I'm excited for you all to come on this journey with me, lol. If you would like to chat, say hello, or share your kanej-related screaming, you can comment here or find me on Instagram @fairytales_of_forever <3

Inej

Chapter Summary

Jordan does some art. Colm comes to visit.

Chapter Notes

I think I'm going to switch to a Saturday posting schedule; it'll be simpler than what I'm doing now, so expect the next chapter on Saturday. Now, here are your shout-outs~

lilieswho, welcome back! I'm glad you liked the character development <3

Wicked333, it will take some struggling, but they're learning to be good parents, and they have an amazing little girl to learn with.

andyoudoctor, Kaz is making good on his promise to be better, slow though it may be <3

alltheworldisinmyhead, I figured I had thrown enough angst at you all that I should make a peace offering before getting back on my nonsense.

apocalyps-o, I am SO HAPPY that you liked those lines!!

whynotcherries, I love it when people find new meanings in my writing that I hadn't even thought of, and you deliver every time <3

SpaceAce1123, welcome to the party! Glad you're liking the slow burn :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Winter has swept down in full over Ketterdam. It isn't like in Ravka, where the swift and gentle flurries would bury the land in drifts deep enough to swim in and the skies would turn silver over the coast. Winter in the city is gray-brown sluice on the streets, patches of ice that those less agile than the Wraith are prone to slip on, and ducking as you march into the wind. It's a kind of cold that isn't just cold, but rather a lingering ache that settles into the very marrow of your bones and takes up residence like an unwelcome visitor. It doesn't help that most of Inej's memories of winter involve Kaz being in a particularly dour mood, thanks to the lack of tourist traffic and his leg acting up.

Speaking of Kaz, she's hardly seen him since that night on the roof. Every once in a while she'll find a note from him, and a few times she's even gone out to gather information and

return the notes in kind, when she can get someone to watch Jordan. It's good to know that she hasn't gotten rusty.

Once it became obvious that she would at least be staying in Ketterdam long enough to say hello to Colm, she'd sent Specht and the rest of her crew on a scouting mission to prepare for their next big ambush. It will help to know more about exactly what they're facing. She does fell somewhat guilty, reading letters from Specht and Fionn in front of the roaring fire of Wylan's manor, but at least from their missives it sounds like things are going well despite the icy seas.

In the meantime, Inej can't say that she minds being holed up with Jesper and Wylan. Despite its size, the mansion is undeniably cozy, and it's good for Jordan to have the company. On her good days, Marya will often come out and join them. Some nights, she's played the piano, and that's when she seems the most like herself—as if the music is a safe part of her memory, a thing deeper and untouched. She's also been painting again. Today, in fact, she's set up an easel in one of the third-floor sitting rooms whose bay window overlooks the back garden. Much to Jordan's delight, Marya has laid an extra canvas down on the floor for her, and the little girl is happily finger-painting a masterpiece.

"Wylan loved to paint when he was her age," says Marya, watching Jordan. Her smile is still somewhat dreamy, but there's a perfectly lucid brightness in her eyes that reminds Inej of her son.

"He still does," says Inej, looking up from her latest bundle of letters and reports to look at Jordan's work. Jordan is currently deep in the throes of artistic passion, judging by the way that she has paint splattered nearly up to her elbows and is frowning in deep concentration. Inej finds herself reminded of Kaz crafting one of his schemes, even if he's a bit neater about it and his hands are marked with ink instead of paint.

There are three rough blobs on the canvas; one of them is mostly shades of blue and brown, one is brilliantly colored, and the last is almost entirely black. There appears to be a sun as well, but it is only above the two colorful shapes.

"What's that?" Inej asks, setting the papers down and shifting over onto her hip to look at Jordan's masterwork.

Jordan jabs one stubby, blue-tipped finger at the canvas. "You. Me. Da."

It's going to take some getting used to, to hear her calling Kaz her da. Then again, he hasn't been around to stop her, and Inej wonders if he would, even if he were here. "That's us?" she asks.

Jordan nods fervently, adding more paint to the figure that Inej suspects to be herself. "Pretty colors for me," she says happily.

"You are very colorful right now," Inej chuckles. "Kaz looks a bit sad, though."

"Dark and sad," Jordan agrees. Inej has to stifle a laugh as Jordan adds more black paint to the Kaz-shape.

“What’s that?” Inej asks, pointing to a line that appears to slash through Kaz’s chest.

“Stick,” says Jordan, poking her tongue out of the corner of her mouth.

“Why is it going...through him?”

Jordan looks all the way up from her art to give Inej an impressive glare. “ *Holding* it.”

“I’m sorry,” says Inej, pressing a hand to her mouth to hide her amused smile. Not just because Jordan’s conviction is, frankly, adorable, but she’s reminded of Kaz again, of how snappish he could get if she criticized the plan he was forming. “I should have known.”

Jordan nods in agreement and returns to her work, every inch the serious artist.

“It’s very lovely,” Marya says mistily, smiling as she adds shading to her roses.

“Thank you,” Jordan says cheerfully.

Oh, Inej thinks, *so now you have manners.*

Her amusement is cut short by a rather impressive thundering of footsteps on the staircase and then approaching down the hall. Inej shakes her head. She doesn’t expect everyone to be as silent as she is, but Jesper could at least *try.*

The lanky Zemeni pokes his head into the room, bursting with color and energy—and, Inej would dare say, nerves. His fingers are fluttering over his hair, his clothes, the furniture, aimless and never quite landing.

“Look!” Jordan chirps, slapping a handprint onto the lower corner of her painting.

“Wha—oh, oh, yeah, looks nice, Jordan.” Inej was right; he *is* more scattered than usual.

A soft smile touches her lips. “I assume he’s here?”

Jesper smiles shakily, relaxing ever so slightly into something like relief. “Yeah.”

“That had better be excitement that I see in your eyes, then,” says Inej, standing and setting her stack of letters aside. She steps forward and takes hold of Jesper’s restless hands, looking up into his face. “Your father will be proud of you.”

He smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You think?”

Inej squeezes his hands with a determined nod. “I know. You’re doing so much better. You’re out of the Barrel. And you’re happy here.”

Jesper puffs out a breath. “Okay. Okay. Thanks.” He shakes his head, and then his usual smile is back, seeming mostly genuine in its brightness. “Do you want to come say hi?”

“Of course.” Inej drops his hands and looks back over her shoulder. “Someone might have to get cleaned up first, though.”

Jordan looks up from her painting. “Bath?” she says mournfully.

“They say that art has its price,” Inej says teasingly as she scoops up the paint-splattered little girl. “And if it makes you feel better, I might have to get cleaned up too, thanks to you.”

“You can show my da your painting,” Jesper volunteers from the doorway.

“Da?” Jordan asks, looking at Inej. “Da!”

“ *His* da,” says Inej, smoothing down Jordan’s hair. Somehow that child has gotten green paint on her nose. “A new friend.” She gives Jesper an amused glance. “Go. You don’t have to wait for us.”

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Apparently an excited Jordan is an efficient Jordan, because not twenty minutes later they’re both presentable and on their way downstairs to meet Colm. Jordan insists on not being carried but allows Inej to hold her hand as she scrambles down the grand staircase.

“Slow down,” Inej laughs. “I don’t want you to fall.”

“No fall,” says Jordan happily, skipping down on light feet. “I fly.”

“Okay, well, let’s not test that one, shall we?” says Inej, giving Jordan’s hand a squeeze.

They’re halfway down the last flight when they see the group of three in the foyer—Jesper, Wylan, and Colm, recognizable even at this distance with his gray-streaked red hair and crumpled hat clutched in his hands. Inej suddenly falters, made uncertain by how unchanged he is compared to the rest of them. She finds her free hand fiddling with her single gold earring. The girl he last knew was a tough and wiry thing, wise but silent, eyes too old for her face. She’s grown into those eyes now. Her face is stung by salt spray, her braid and blouse loose, her manner bolder than it has ever been—and none of that begins to touch the child at her side. She knows what he’ll think. He’s like her parents that way—one plus one equals two, and a pair of teenagers dancing around each other then plus a little dark-eyed Suli girl now has an equally obvious answer. How does she explain that things are not so simple for them? Especially now, when Jordan will proudly proclaim Kaz as her da?

Part of Inej fears that they’ve scared him off. She saw him fighting, saw him trying, saw him pushing to the limits of what that coiled knot inside of him would allow, and she’ll admit that it excited her. That the part of her that was begging for the wire to be raised ever higher wanted to see how far they could go, in the fatalistic fear that it had to be now or it would all fall away.

She hears Kaz’s voice again, speaking words she’s not sure he’s ever said but she knows that he would. *There’s only what is.* Consequences of her own actions or no, the circumstances won’t change as she wills, so she will face them as they are. And right now, that means heeding the call of the child who’s tugging her downstairs.

Colm turns and his face breaks into a smile when he sees them. There are more lines around his eyes than Inej remembers, more gray shot through his red hair, but he looks so much the same that it's almost shocking. His gray eyes are kind. "Inej, as I remember?"

"You remember right," says Inej. She feels for a fleeting, ridiculous moment as if she doesn't know what to do, but there's a welcoming ease about Colm that chases away her worry.

"Oh," he says, and his smile widens at the sight of Jordan. "Now, who's this?" He kneels and puts out a rough hand to Jordan, who takes hold of one of his fingers, though she keeps a tight grip on Inej.

"This is Jordan," Inej says, unable to deny the fondness that rises in her voice. Even if Jordan isn't her daughter by blood, the little girl has won Inej over with her bright and clever spirit, the way that she sees the world as being simple and good. Even if it's not all true, it's a good thing to be reminded of.

"She's precious," says Colm, making Jordan giggle by darting his hand just out of reach when she tries to grab it. "Ah, you've won," he says to her, and looks back at Inej with a knowing grin. "The dimples! Too bad Jesper never had them," he adds with a wink.

" *Da,* " Jesper complains, but he looks much more at ease than he did earlier. Inej gives him a brief smile.

"I like him all right without them," Wylan volunteers with a shrug.

"And that's all I ever need," Jesper says, while Inej just chuckles at the pair of them.

"Apologies, Jes, but this little lady might just have stolen my attention for the week," Colm says in a mock-formal tone. He holds out his hands to Jordan, and she doesn't bother to take them, instead clambering into his arms. He laughs and stands up, still holding Jordan, who sways happily.

"I feel replaced," Inej comments, grinning.

Jesper shakes his head. "That makes two of us."

"You might just find it useful, Inej," says Colm, bouncing Jordan in his arms and making her squeal happily. "If there's anything you want to get done, now you've someone to watch her."

"Maybe that would be all right," Inej replies, unable to keep a smile from her face. In the midst of all of their scheming, she'd never quite realized how good it was to have Colm around. He might have seemed simple to their street-hardened band, but, like right now, he had the intuition to not ask questions or offer judgements and instead to offer the kind of patience and compassion they'd all been denied.

Inej has the fleeting thought that Kaz should come and talk to him. Maybe nothing would come of it, but maybe unconditionality, which not even she can give him, would be a good thing.

“Lunch is probably ready, Da, if you want to get settled,” Jesper offers. He’s already picked up his father’s worn carpetbag and is rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Jordan cheers. “Food!”

Colm laughs and gestures them forward. “Lunch it is, it seems.”

Chapter End Notes

comments make me write faster. can confirm. the update schedule will stay the same, but it makes me less stressed. anyways.

also, come find me on instagram @fairytales_of_forever

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz accepts an invitation and finds himself cornered by fatherly advice.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the new Saturday schedule! Miss me? At any rate, let's do some shout-outs~

wicked333, I'm so happy that you liked those quotes! Colm and Jordan are adorable.

SpaceAce1123, the comfort means a lot! Thank you!

khaki83101, your wish is my command ;)

lilieswho, this chapter has pretty much everything you asked for <3

whynotcherries, I just HAD to sprinkle in the slightest bit of angst because it is, after all, me.

alltheworldisinmyhead, the holy mother of fluff indeed. You all deserve it <3

Happy_Hudson, domestic family is my jam! Now we just need to get Kaz in here.

andyoudoctor, Jordan taking her art as seriously as Kaz with his schemes was one of my favorite parts of writing that chapter :D

Yes_a_robot, I don't know if I should be happy or deeply concerned.

AnimusLunari, I'm especially happy that you liked the quote about how much Inej has changed. It's really important to me to see how much she's grown into herself.

Cherr1es_04, thank you so much! I love seeing your comments <3

stefaniegk, mine too, stefanie, mine too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A bored Kaz Brekker is a dangerous thing.

Late afternoon is the slowest time of day in the Barrel, the kind of hour that makes it easy for Kaz to understand why men like Rollins were happy to coast on their success. When you've put all of the work into becoming king, you want to recline on the throne at last. But Kaz toppled Pekka Rollins and those like him, and he himself is of a breed too hungry and too clever to get complacent while he wears the crown.

Part of the expansion of the Crow Club involved adding secret windows to the private booths that border the main room, such as the one in which Kaz now sits, a glass beside him. They allow him, or any member of the Dregs who's privy to the information, to open a wall panel with a lock and hinges disguised as nails, revealing a window through which he might watch the proceedings at the tables. Right now, the club is barely a third of the way full, but come nightfall it will be bursting with pigeons, even at its new capacity.

He'll look over the club's tallies tonight—and he does them all in his head anyway—so he has no paper with him, nothing to do except to watch the few players at the tables and mull over his running schemes. The property on the Lid that he's converted into a (mostly) respectable eatery is doing well—as are the contraband hidden in its storerooms and the clandestine meetings held in its booths. So far, while the Liddies are suspicious, they don't have proof enough to make trouble, either. Shipments coming in to Fifth Harbor have been consistent, as have the numbers of pigeons spilling onto the docks and into the Barrel, though consistently low thanks to the weather. Kaz will readily admit that this has left him cross. He's never been known as unpredictable or temperamental by any means—anyone who's paying attention can sense his moods brewing like black clouds over the harbor—but his Dregs have been keeping extra distance lately, which he wryly supposes is something about winter to be grateful for.

He's got his bad leg stretched out under the table, his cane resting against his hip, but there's still a dull and unrelenting ache that has settled into his bones in a way that he's gotten used to. He sets a hand against the point of the old break but only rubs it half-heartedly, knowing it won't do much to help.

Then he stills. If he were outdoors, he'd say there has just been a change in the wind. It feels like that—a tugging at his neatly pressed seams, a ripple in the black water. But he knows better. He doesn't look at the rafters over his head.

"If I'd known we had a spider problem, I would have spent more money on cleaning this place," he says out loud, something that is too much like a smile curling his lips.

Inej drops onto the table and lands with barely a ripple on the surface of his drink. She crouches there and pulls her hood back, the dim yellow lights gleaming on her hair. "It's a bit early to be drinking."

"It's a bit late to still be trying to sneak up on me."

"Maybe that was never my aim," says Inej. She shows no inclination towards getting off the table, and Kaz doesn't bother to push it. He's too busy fighting off the urge to soak in the shape and the details of her, the way she's a lithe little shadow, yet radiant before him, more real than the memories he's been fighting off these past weeks. He doesn't like the way that

the sight of her strikes something guilty and tender in him. It's not as if he's done anything wrong, exactly.

"I have something for you," she says, and holds out what appears to be a rolled-up canvas. Kaz takes it, suppressing the not unpleasant shudder that runs through him when his gloved fingertips brush her palm.

"A stolen painting?"

A wispy smile crosses her face, there and then gone, wily as Inej herself. "From right under the artist's nose."

Kaz hums, feeling it vibrate low in his throat, and begins to unroll the canvas. "Darling Inej, don't tell me you went on a heist without me."

The words hang loud and heavy in the space between them, words he once used to tease her without a thought. They mean too much now. But Inej doesn't look at him with any embarrassment or even coldness—the set of her brows is high, her eyes expectant. She speaks next, but she's still waiting on something from him. If only he knew what it was. "You didn't seem available."

There it is. There are many things that he could say—that he already told her, that night on the roof, that he didn't know what he would become when reality came back to him; that she was leaving soon and he needed to let go; a thousand others, all true but not fair or kind. He isn't fair, he isn't kind, but he'd told her he would be better. So he says nothing, and unrolls the painting instead.

Kaz's eyebrows lift. It consists mainly of three blobs, two colorful and one mostly black, with a small, reddish handprint in the lower corner and what he thinks is a sun overhead.

"I think Jordan wanted you to have it," Inej supplies. There's mischief glittering in her dark eyes, jewels worth more than all the fine jewelry he's seen, stolen, and sold.

"Right," says Kaz, bemused. "And it is…"

Inej's smile is sad in a way that he feels, illogically, to be his fault. "The three of us. Her family."

As if Kaz needed another ache to strike him, this one sweet and singing through his chest. His hands flatten against the canvas, gloves smoothing over the figures that suddenly seem so fragile. This should only reinforce his conviction that she's leaving soon, so better to let it grow some distance, but something irrational and too much like panic in him says to draw them closer.

"You didn't just come here to give me this," says Kaz, brushing his thumb over the little blob that he suspects is meant to be Jordan.

Inej rolls her shoulders back. Kaz's eyes follow the lines of her motion, the elegance in the way that they shift. "No. Colm arrived yesterday. You should come say hello."

“I’m not in the habit of making social calls, Wraith.”

“Then make new habits. You can start with not calling me Wraith.”

Kaz lifts an eyebrow. “It’s the name of your ship. You’ve tired of it?”

Slight downturn of the chin, a press of her lips that makes the little black space between them vanish—a magic trick that would never grow old. He could watch her expressions all day. “It’s the name you called me for business alone,” she says. “Now you call me that when you’re trying to let me go.”

Kaz masks his frustration. He should probably figure out what exactly he wants before he goes acting on it. “And you won’t allow it?”

“I don’t need to answer that.” Inej stands and hops off the table, pausing by the door.

“You’re not using the rafters again?” Kaz questions.

“I don’t need to.” She goes, and she doesn’t ask if she’ll see him later or chastise him to come. Somehow, that’s all the more infuriating than if she had.

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As it turns out, the five stages of grief also apply to social outings. Kaz is currently in denial. This is despite the fact that he’s standing on Jesper and Wylan’s doorstep, stamping the icy sludge off of his boots and struggling to look dignified while doing so.

The door flies open, and a blast of warm air hits Kaz in the face. He tries to maintain his scowl while squinting and resisting the urge to fix his hair, which has now been blown entirely astray. Jesper is standing behind the door, wearing a slightly manic grin. Kaz continues to regret his decision.

“Does your maid dislike me that much?” he asks.

“More like we like you that much,” says Jesper, “Ghezen knows why. But stay out here if you want. It matches your personality.”

“You are the last person I would trust to advise me on what matches,” says Kaz drily, stepping inside after the erstwhile sharpshooter.

“That’s cold. Not even an apology?” Jesper complains as he leads Kaz into the foyer.

“Well, why would I ask for forgiveness if I’ve never given it? That would make me a hypocrite, Jesper.”

“Right. Saints forbid you add *hypocrisy* to your list of sins.”

“Can’t make a profit on it, can I? I’m only cruel in the ways that pay,” says Kaz, slightly behind Jesper as they traipse into the firelit parlor from last time. It’s only late afternoon, gray

skies in the windows, but the fire in the hearth is roaring with a merry warmth that Kaz feels repelled by and drawn to all at once.

Speaking of being drawn and conflicted and all of those uncomfortable feelings that he was avoiding so nicely until now, Inej is sitting on the carpet by the hearth with Jordan sitting in her lap, playing with her hair. When she sees him, however, Jordan squeals and scrambles to her feet, then runs over to him. “Da!”

Kaz goes stiff. He feels as if the room has gotten very quiet, even though Jesper is doggedly talking even louder as if to fill the space.

Kaz catches Colm Fahey in his peripheral vision. He doesn’t look at the farmer, but convinces himself that it’s not for fear of the look on the man’s face. He can’t quite answer why it would be, then, however. At his feet, Jordan is bobbing back and forth. Shyly, she puts her arms out. “Hug okay?”

Kaz is feeling more emotions right now than he has at a single time in recent memory. He feels vaguely sick. He thinks hazily that he has so many I-told-you-so’s to say: feelings are, in fact, overrated, regardless of what anyone says.

And yet. And yet, he smooths his gloved hand over her short dark hair, the pressure in his touch inviting her ever so slightly closer. She gives a happy but blessedly quiet squeak and goes to fling her arms around his leg, but switches to a much gentler approach off of a look from Inej. Kaz braces himself, but it’s...it’s not so bad. The warmth of her little body even soothes the ache a little. He has to stay focused; he can’t do anything else right now, can’t even speak for fear of his mind slipping, but at least he’s here.

“Evening, Mr. Brekker.” The slight accent alerts Kaz to Colm’s presence, and he mentally kicks himself for allowing his focus to drift. He looks up and returns the greeting with a brief nod.

“Jordan, let him sit,” says Inej, reaching out a hand. Jordan whines, but complies, scrambling back into Inej’s arms. The firelight is golden on the both of them, the shadows deep and warm, and Kaz has to force his gaze away. This is why he was keeping his distance, though maybe he was just a fool to think that he ever could.

Kaz makes his way to a chair and lowers himself into it, more slowly than he would have liked to. Now he can make a proper analysis of Colm; the farmer looks bizarrely unchanged, given how different the world seems from when they saw him last. Kaz’s impression is the same as before—that the man has an utterly open, honest face. It’s a bit jarring, frankly. Even Jesper knows how to hide his thoughts when he has to.

“I didn’t think we would see you,” Colm says amiably, a hand resting on his knee, his posture back and at ease.

“I’m surprised you would want to,” Kaz replies. “Given the circumstances of our last meeting and what exactly Jesper was doing in my employ.” He isn’t here to make friends or pretenses, so better to dispense with both.

Maddeningly enough, Colm just nods, the picture of wise acceptance. “I suppose my feelings weren’t entirely kind. But I’d suspect that you also have something to do with his circumstances now.”

Kaz resists the urge to roll his eyes in Inej’s direction. The last thing he needs is another person trying to make a saint out of him. It will just be disappointing for both of them. “I’m a thief by trade, Mr. Fahey, but I don’t steal credit if I can help it.” A bold-faced lie, but as Jesper pointed out earlier, at this point it’s just another speck of gravel in the quarry of his sins, pointless to count when there’s no torment or penance awaiting him.

“I think he might be trying to say it was Jesper and Wylan’s doing,” says Inej from the floor.

Wylan smirks. “Didn’t know that you needed a Kaz translator, did you?”

“I understand fine,” Colm says placatingly. “But all that is my long-winded way of saying that no, Mr. Brekker, I’m not angry with you.”

“Easier for the both of us.” Whether or not he *should* be isn’t Kaz’s business.

Jordan has been babbling to Inej throughout this conversation, and Inej—suddenly, it seems—stands, holding the little girl against her hip. “Sorry to interrupt, but she wants to show you two her paintings,” she says, nodding to Jesper and Wylan.

Kaz sneaks a glance at Colm, who looks more understanding than he would have preferred. *Not subtle, Wraith.*

“Oh, uh—sure,” says Jesper, nodding a bit too fast. “Love to.”

They’re barely out of the room and it’s already too quiet. Kaz leans back in a forced posture of relaxation and turns his head to look out the window at the sleet falling over his city. “I assume you were involved in that orchestration.”

“Honest doesn’t mean simple, Mr. Brekker. In fact, I might be reading these things better than you can.”

Kaz’s lips thin, but this isn’t the time to get defensive. He needs to be careful and plot his moves. Playing this right is crucial to holding everything together. “And your conclusion is?”

Colm smiles gently, making crows’ feet crinkle at the corner of his eyes. “That you still think you have a choice.”

Wouldn’t *that* sound threatening from any other mouth. Kaz steeples his gloved fingertips in his lap, pulling himself into a dangerous calm. “By which you mean?”

Colm twists his hands around his crumpled hat. It’s probably the same one that he had years ago. “I don’t know anything about the other circumstances, mind, but that little girl has decided you’re her father. That isn’t something you can accept or decline. It just is.”

There’s only what is. If he hasn’t said that before, he’s certainly thought it. His eyes remain cold, though, and he doesn’t respond—he senses that, whether he wants it or agrees with it,

Jesper's father has more to say.

And he's right; the man leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, his eyes far too kind. Kaz needs to leave. "What you do have a choice in is how you're going to handle it. There are lots of wrong ways to do this and just as many right ways, but you do have to do it."

Or what? Kaz thinks bitterly, but that's a stupid question. A thousand responses rise to his mind, all biting, all the wrong thing to say. "I appreciate the input," he forces out.

Colm laughs—full and hearty and all wrong. "No you don't," he says. "I'd be surprised if you did. No need to appreciate it. Just remember it."

The only thing I remember is that I need to get back to the Crow Club before it gets busy , Kaz almost says. So why doesn't he? Why can't he barricade himself behind the kind of cruelty that he used to toss out without a second thought? This is how his guard slips. This is how he loses his kingdom to something so fickle as caring.

Colm stands, still clutching his hat, and runs a hand through his graying hair. "I've said my piece," he says, "and now I'd like to see those paintings. Maybe you'll come?"

Kaz's eyes find the sleet and swirling mist outside the window again. He knows the real meaning; honest men aren't subtle, and the fact that Colm is testing him can barely be considered hidden. But he isn't going to change for appearance's sake. "I'll catch up," he says, and listens until the footsteps are gone.

Kaz rises, takes his cane, and makes his way back out through the foyer. The rolled-up canvas in his pocket bounces against his hip.

It's going to be a long walk home.

Chapter End Notes

It's going to be a bumpy road, but we've got one more chapter in this arc with some Kanej for you and then we'll do a time skip. While you're waiting for the next chapter, feel free to check out my other works or stalk my Instagram @fairytales_of_forever <3 Also, just so you know, your comments make me do a happy little writer dance.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej don't say goodbye. Kaz makes a promise.

Chapter Notes

Did you miss me? ;) Well, I won't make you wait any longer, so let's get right into shout-outs~

Wicked333, fear not, I will hug Jordan for you <3

khaki83101, don't we all :(but it's coming!

SpaceAce1123, don't worry, we're getting there :D

andyoudoctor, I will readily admit that the Kanej dialogue and the hug with Jordan were my favorite parts of the chapter, lol.

alltheworldisinmyhead, this is me after all, I can only take an angst break for so long ;)

whynotcherries, in summary: couples who scheme together stay together, The Audacity is real, and Jordan deserves the world. <3

Happy_Hudson, if someone wants to make a vine comp for this fic, I DEMAND that your idea be included XD

galeforcestorm13, thank you! I appreciated the coziness <3

curlyhairedkatniss, yeahhh, the whole "name the child after your dead brother" thing has its repercussions.

searchingforwonderland13, you're going to like this chapter then ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They're leaving today. Maybe that's why Inej wakes up before dawn, the sky dark and silver with winter clouds over the roofs of her city—still her city, despite everything. She swings her legs over the side of the bed but doesn't set her feet on the floor, instead just breathing in the burn of the cold air and closing her eyes into the feeling. Some part of her is going to miss this. The sea air will taste too clean again.

At last, she sets her feet on the floor and walks to the chest of drawers, even more light-footed than usual on the cold wooden floor. She picks up the captain's hat that sits on the dresser, turns it over in her hands ever so briefly, then sets it on her head at a jaunty angle with barely a glance in the mirror. Jordan is still asleep next door; Jesper will bring her by the docks later so that she's not underfoot while they prepare the *Wraith* to take to the seas again.

Inej crosses to the window, runs a hand under her braid to smooth it over her shoulder, and slides the latch open without the slightest squeak. Then she's out on the wall, springing off to catch the next sill, the next roof, and maybe after that she'll get hold of a silver cloud to look down on her city. Or maybe she doesn't have time for gazing; the harbor is calling her, and who is she not to answer?

It's good to have the time to think, up here. Despite the fog and fumes rising with steam from the dewdrops, the sky clears her mind. Saints know it's been full enough these days.

She wasn't surprised, exactly, when they returned downstairs and no one knew where Kaz had gone—only that he had. Guilt and impatience run tandem in her, because maybe it was her fault for scaring him, but then maybe he just needs to make up his mind.

He's trying, she reminds herself. *Before, he would never have greeted Jordan like that. He wouldn't have stayed to talk to Colm.* And it's all true. Unfortunately, it just spurs her on to imagine what else they could be or do.

But there is something she didn't tell him, something she might not have even if she'd had the chance. She's been comfortable with her friends for years now, but the day after that night on the roof, Jesper threw an arm around her shoulders, and she flinched. She'd managed to hide it, but she still remembers the feeling of her heart jackrabbiting in her chest, the sense of silks strangling her, the desperate flash of an urge to run, there and then gone.

Maybe it was the abandonment of the things she had used to protect herself that changed things—the openness of trying to heal. She'd opened the curtain to the memories and feelings she'd been storing away, blown off the dust and begun to unpack the boxes, and what she found inside was far too raw and unchanged. It's like her mother used to say when mending clothes: sometimes a messy seam has to be torn out and re-sewn. Maybe they have to make new memories. Maybe that's okay.

She's within sight of the docks now, so she catches hold of a drainpipe and slides down to the icy, cobbled street. She probably should have more layers on than what she's wearing, she thinks as the chill seeps through her clothes, but it wouldn't be worth the way that the extra bulk would restrict her freedom to move. Anyway, she marched through Fjerda with a barely-healed stab wound. She can handle another Ketterdam winter.

A few men are moving around by the docks, coiling ropes and carrying crates, but for the most part it's too early for her crew to be preparing the ship just yet. That's all right; Inej doesn't mind the quiet. And while her crew isn't here, someone else is.

She's been expecting it, she realizes. She just didn't know she'd been expecting to see him until now, until the undercurrent of feeling rose into conscious thought. She can't keep

herself from walking a bit faster down the quay, down to where he stands, the bitter wind off the harbor ruffling his dark hair.

She steps up next to him, and they stand in silence. She can feel his warmth across the inches of difference. Maybe if they were different, she could lean into him, and they could share their heat. If they were anyone else, she could feel his lean, solid frame against her, instead of just being intensely conscious of it in a way that scares her. She knows she's been protecting herself from these feelings, but now that she's trying not to, there is a physicality to it all that's foreign and forbidden to her.

"I knew I'd find you here," Inej says softly. "I just didn't realize I knew until I saw you."

"At least I wasn't standing in the cold for nothing," Kaz murmurs, and Inej closes her eyes against the way that the ragged burn of his voice washes over her and wakes something in her. She doesn't need that now.

"Not for nothing—there's a nice view," Inej offers. They always talk like this, like a circling bird—eventually they'll get down to what they're really seeking, but they have to go around and around it first, scouting for danger.

"So there is," says Kaz, and there's a swoop in her stomach because he isn't looking out over the harbor anymore—he's looking at her, his words and his dark eyes burning deep. There's a doomed inevitability to it all, Inej thinks. Like calls to like, and they are two broken people who will keep clumsily trying to mend each other and themselves, circling forever. Will they ever find land? Will they take the chance and dive? Will it even be something they can know?

"I don't want you to want me, Kaz," says Inej, meeting his eyes and holding them there. "I want you to choose me, and keep choosing me."

"I did," says Kaz, a bitter blackness in his voice, "on Vellgeluk, and Van Eck took you."

"And you burned his empire. You took everything that mattered to him. You destroyed his reputation. You wouldn't have gone that far if all he had done was stand against you."

Kaz is quiet, but it's not a silence she can interpret. Before them, the fog dances like ghosts over the harbor.

"You already work with me. You fight with me. You stand with me. Just *be* with me." Inej turns her head to look at him, at the clean-cut edges of his profile and the things that haunt him lurking in the shadows on his face.

Kaz's lips—a tragically beautiful feature, Inej sees now—part, and his breath fogs in the air as he gives something almost like a dry laugh. "You're leaving."

"Distance has never made much of a difference for us, has it?" Inej reminds him gently. Kaz looks down, his Adam's apple rising in his throat, and she shakes her head. "It's gotten worse for me too, you know."

His eyes slowly drift to her, away from the dark water, away from the place Inej could not follow him. He says nothing, but he doesn't need to speak.

"The wanting and the not being able to, both." Voicing it seems to give power to the pull inside of her, and she smooths her hands forcefully over her trousers, swallowing hard. It's been a long time since she has been so conscious of the strength of his frame, the heat of his presence, the intoxicating pull of his dark eyes. She isn't the first woman to feel it, she's willing to guess, but she is the first to be ready for all that it entails. The silence swirls between them and dissipates in the heavy fog.

"I...kept your letters." Kaz brushes a gloved thumb over the back of his opposite hand where it rests on his cane. Inej might not have recognized the words as his if she hadn't seen him form them; his speech is usually an orator's, even in conversation—smooth, polished, a tad grandiose, always smugly clever. These are an uncertain boy's words, uneven and knocking into each other as they try to settle into an ill-fitting new space. They traipse tentatively after each other and sit heavy in the gray dawn. Inej is reminded of that same voice asking, *Is my tie straight?*

She turns to him like a startled bird. "You did?" If Kaz sounds like an uncertain boy, Inej sounds like a shy little girl. She feels as if she's meeting this part of herself for the first time.

Kaz lifts one shoulder in a jerky, uneven shrug. "Maybe I should have burned them. But there was important intelligence that I wanted to reference later, and—" Now he's talking too fast, trying to recover his uncaring front, and Inej cuts him off with a full, warm laugh that rolls from her lips and fills the quiet of the morning quay. Kaz Brekker—harder to break into than the Ice Court, but once you're inside, everything is on display if you know where to look.

She listens for it this time, and she hears Kaz's breath catch. Her heart swells. Nina was right.

As they stand in a silence that's warm despite the winter morning, ripples of her laugh still seeming to echo around them, dockworkers slowly begin to arrive, along with the members of her crew. The sailors and workers call to each other, bickering and teasing, directing one another here and there. A gull or two even swoop down from the clouds. Life goes on, and surely as the golden spill of the hourglass, it pulls them apart. That's all right; they will circle, but never separate.

They've been standing long enough that when Kaz shifts beside Inej, it awakens her attention. She doesn't look at him, but she listens for his voice, her heart a channel for his words.

"Tell Jordan...her da will be here when she gets back."

Inej closes her eyes and turns her face to the bitter wind off the harbor. Just as she'd known he would be here, she feels it when he leaves, and her eyes stay closed.

She doesn't say goodbye. She just lets go. After all, he'll be here when she gets back.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve gotten back on schedule with writing ahead, and let me tell you, we have some VERY EXCITING STUFF PLANNED. I might tell you about it if you come find my Instagram @fairytales_of_forever ;)

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan and Inej return. Kaz gets invited to a birthday party.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas to all who celebrate! Here's my present to you <3 It's timeskip time, so it's been 2 years since the last chapter…but only in the story, although it might feel that way IRL. Let's get into some shout-outs~

khaki83101, I had to make it better somehow ;)

hardly_a_ghost, *cackles maniacally*

Violetstar5, thank you so much for your sweet comment <3

Wicked333, and the exciting stuff starts…now!

EastfitHadia, I agree on the caveat that I don't think it's insecurity or self-hatred. Kaz definitely shields people from his perception of himself because he does think (or know) that he's a terrible person, but he's accepted that fact.

andyoudoctor, I think that this is definitely a reflection of that conversation. In some ways, they've come so far, but in other ways nothing has changed at all.

alltheworldisinmyhead, you are not allowed to call MY writing stunning and then throw something at me like you just did <3

Searchingforwonderland13, it was a long time coming :D

curlyhairedkatniss, it's good for him to rediscover that part of himself <3

whynotcherries, Kanej is superior indeed!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This has been the longest one yet, and Kaz would know. Almost a year, they've been gone—eleven months and fourteen days, specifically. Not that he's counting.

(Maybe that's a lie—maybe he is counting, everything from the days between voyages to the days between letters—but lying is his business. So are numbers, for that matter. But it's getting harder and harder to delegate what's business and what isn't where Inej is concerned.)

And if he's *really* counting, it's been more like two years since their last long stay, peppered with days-long visits here and there, long enough to resupply the Wraith and then the sea takes another Jordan from him, again.

He's been practicing, where he can. Taking his gloves off as soon as he's in his room or his office alone, turning over his bare hands, forcing himself to be conscious of the sensations that are no longer dulled by leather—cold air, rough wood, the smoothness of his pen. He'll stare at the expanse of his own skin until it starts to blur into decay, until sun-starved pale becomes fish-belly white. Then the gloves go back on, and he shuts his eyes and pretends he's not angry with himself, though why he bothers to hide it when he's alone he can't answer.

Lately, he's taken to reading Inej's letters with his gloves off. It's safer than if she were really there, but it's worth something. Sometimes he doesn't even read them right away; he just closes his eyes and lets himself be wreathed by jasmine and sea salt until the ache of nameless wanting ebbs away. There's a note of irony to it; Kaz has built a career on knowing what people do behind closed doors, and his own guilty habit is to clutch a letter like some lovesick idiot. At least he knows how to keep from getting caught. He's not about to abandon the mythos of Dirtyhands that's kept him alive—especially when Jordan is likely to end up under its umbrella as well. He can't keep her a secret forever.

As any decent lockpick knows—certainly a master like him—the trick to picking a lock is to be able to break it down and build it back again, to get inside of it and know its inner workings, damage and all. He's been deeply familiar for years now with how his mind can serve him, but never liked to dwell on what made it his downfall. At least one good thing has come from having too much time to think these days; now he knows better than he ever has what's stopping him, though not so much how to fix it.

The letter in his bare hands contains a good deal of carefully concealed, useful information, but there's one line that he keeps reading over and over.

By the way, I'll be visiting your mother about a week after this letter reaches you. I hope your father's business spares you for long enough to join us.

A shadow of a smirk crosses Kaz's face. Only Inej could get away with such a jibe. He's too proud to admit that the remark her hidden message refers to—that is, his mother being Ketterdam and his father being profit—might have been a bit much, but he'll concede enough to allow her to tease him for it. Besides, he'll feel more forgiving about any remark that heralds Inej's return.

Today. Today, it's been a week. She only said *about* a week, he knows, and it's well-nigh impossible to be punctual about these things, but Inej has always kept time better than certain others of his associates (one Zemeni marksman comes to mind). Besides, somewhere along the way a sliver of hope has worked its way into him, and now he can't figure out how to get rid of it—or if he even wants to.

He needs to check the safe house in the Warehouse District that's become their meeting place anyway, Kaz convinces himself. If Inej isn't there, then he'll still be able to ensure its security so that it's ready when she does arrive. If she *is* there—well. Kaz isn't one to walk into a situation without a plan, but imagining what could happen, in this case, might turn out to be far worse than improvising once he gets there.

The outcome that he's expecting, however, might be told by the fact the he leaves his gloves in his pocket, folding Inej's letter with his bare hands and slipping it in beside them.

<><><>

It feels ridiculous, but Kaz can't stop thinking about how cold the crow's head of his cane is against his bare hands. It's nice in a way; cool and rigid, unforgiving, nothing like flesh. But he's gotten used to knowing the world through shapes and not textures, how easily it gives in his grip, and now a new corner of his mind is occupied—the cobwebs cleared out to make room for texture, temperature, new sensations that he never needed to get by.

Narrow alleys darkened by awnings are excellent places to hide a secret entrance, especially in Ketterdam, because how many people are going to stumble into a place like that? Kaz finds the loose cobblestone in the street with the toe of his shoe, then feels six bricks up from there (and the bricks are cold, too), pushing the sixth one in with the head of his cane. The panel in the brick wall slides away with a light touch, admitting Kaz into the storehouse; as it turns out, one of the upsides of being rich is the ability to indulge his dramatic side with traps, secret entrances, and all manner of hidden security features anywhere that's owned by the Dregs. It's just another kind of illusion, after all, like a magician's hat with a false bottom.

Dusty shafts of sunlight filter into the storehouse from windows high on the wall, hitting ancient (and mostly empty) crates stacked in the corners. It's a fair distance from Fifth Harbor, but closer than the Slat or the Crow Club—also more covert. The success of his and Inej's joint operation requires the element of surprise.

The place looks empty, but Kaz knows it's not. The fine coating of dust on the floor has been disturbed, and when he checks the latch on one of the few crates that actually contains anything (maps, mostly), it has clearly been recently opened. Besides, shadows don't usually giggle like that.

"You've gotten better, Jordan," Kaz comments, looking nowhere in particular. "But perhaps don't move so much."

The dark shape half-concealed behind a crate scrambles over the top of the rough wood and becomes a little girl in the dim light, pouting spectacularly at him. Kaz carefully conceals his surprise. She's all legs now, her hair long enough to be pulled back from her face, wearing a little red vest over an all-black ensemble that's reminiscent of Inej's spywear.

"Don't feel bad," says another shadow, melting away from the wall. "He can find *me,* after all."

"Then one day I'm gonna be better than you," Jordan declares, little fists set on her hips.

Kaz says nothing, his eyes trained on Inej. She's not so much changed; but then, he looks for the things about her that stay constant, the things that have made her someone he can rely on. That single gold earring still gleams in her ear, and her braid swishes down to her hips, her hair held back from her face with a red bandanna tied over it. The smile that she gives him is full and radiant, her dark eyes gleaming, and Kaz feels the push of the lever—greed, but a whole different kind than he's used to, one he doesn't know how to relieve or satisfy.

"Very punctual of you," he says at last. *Wraith* almost slips out, but he remembers what she said before. *That's what you call me when you're trying to let go.* And just now, that's the last thing he wants to do. He wants to be selfish. He wants to keep her with him. He wishes he could hold her, just the once.

"I'm not the only one who was here on time," says Inej, and now there's a spark of mischief in that smile, closed-lipped like a secret, and she's going to be the death of him—Kaz Brekker, killed right here in this Saints-forsaken warehouse. Kaz flexes his hands hard against the head of his cane, hoping desperately to regain himself, but he barely remembers what she said well enough to craft a response.

"I'm known for keeping my word," Kaz replies, casting a look at Jordan. *Tell Jordan her da will be here when she gets back.* He meant it, and he's made a point to mean it every day since.

"Why are we here?" Jordan complains. "It's cold."

Inej laughs, and Kaz is *this close* to praying to some god to come and save him. He swears she's doing it on purpose. "It's also safe, love," she says, and Kaz tries and fails to let the memory of that last word pass him by instead of embedding itself deep. "I don't know how well you remember them, but we're going to stay with Jesper and Wylan after this."

Jordan frowns slightly in concentration, and her brow furrows in the same way that Inej's does. Kaz fights down the urge to look desperately at the heavens because now there are *two of them.*

Jordan nods carefully. She keeps looking shyly at Kaz as if she's not entirely sure what to do with him, and he can't blame her. It's been a long time since he saw the wide-eyed toddler who leapt at his presence. This little girl will have to get to know him all over again. But he's been here and he will be here, just like he said he would be.

"Here," Kaz says roughly, shrugging off his coat and holding it out to her. He's sure that he doesn't sound very comforting, but it's the best he can do, even when no one is watching. He's sure that it was the right choice, though, when Jordan's eyes light up and she eagerly grabs the coat with both hands.

"Careful, it's heavy," says Inej, sounding amused as Jordan wraps herself in the coat like a blanket rather than bothering to put it on. Inej looks up at Kaz over Jordan's head, gratitude shining in her eyes, and she doesn't have to say a word. That smile is all he needs.

Jordan curls up on the crate she's been sitting on, and Inej sits on the one beside her, moving over so that there's room for a second person. It's a clear invitation. Kaz smooths one hand

reflexively over the head of his cane, finding comfort again in the cold metal, before stepping forward decisively and taking it. He can't be tentative about this, or he'll lose his nerve.

There's a breath between their shoulders now, but not much more. Inej leans back slightly and turns her head to face him. Kaz takes the chance to take in the details of her again, the slopes and ridges of her face, the arch of her brows, the slant of her shoulders. He breathes in the moment, afraid to lose it.

"We've been celebrating the rough anniversary of my finding Jordan as her birthday," Inej comments after a brief but comfortable silence.

Jordan pipes up, "I'm…um…"

"How old are you now?" Inej coaches.

"Four! I think."

"So you're almost five."

"Almost five," Jordan tells Kaz proudly, enunciating the syllables, leaning around Inej to look at him.

Kaz raises a brow. "So I've heard." He isn't sure yet where this is going, but he'll let the conversation take its course. Inej can have all of the time that she needs. He can pretend that this is how it will always be, with no one watching and enough hope to try something new.

"I wanted to celebrate with her while we're here." Inej's hand slides to rest next to his on the crate, and he knows she doesn't miss the slight shiver that ripples through him at the barest whisper of contact, but it's…it's all right. He's still here, with them, and he's keeping his promise to stay.

Kaz tilts his head to the side, his eyes finding the slatted sunlight through the high windows. "What did you have in mind?"

He can just about *feel* Inej smirking, so he breaks off from his train of thought and looks at her. "Something you'd like to say?"

Inej shakes her head, but he was right about that smirk. "Scheming face," she says. "Maybe not required. I thought we might be able to get my parents to join us, and maybe even Nina."

Kaz knows roughly the length of a voyage to or from Ravka, as well as how long Inej plans to stay in the city, so it only takes a moment for him to compare those things and draw a conclusion. "This is an invitation, then."

"As opposed to a request for permission or your opinion? Yes," says Inej, her fingertips brushing over the back of his hand. "I've already got it planned, so you can put your scheming face away for now. But I would like you to come."

Despite Inej's words, Kaz's eyes drift to the light through the windows again. It's falling on the three of them now, creating an almost absurdly picturesque scene—if this were a painting,

he'd steal it and hang it in his office.

But it's not a painting, it's a moment, and a fleeting one at that. When he leaves this place, when they part ways, the gloves will go back on and he'll be Dirtyhands again, heartless and beholden to no one. They're all depending on it. How much can he afford to compromise his legend before he gets caught and it can no longer protect him?

But he can feel Jordan's eyes on him, wide and dark like her mother's, peering out over the collar of his coat. She shifts nervously, then asks, "Will you *please* come…Da?"

Saints, Ghezen, and every other god save him. Everyone who believes it will do any good needs to pray for Kaz Brekker, because he is officially powerless. He turns his hand over, palm up, and links his fingers with Inej's, looking at his family.

"All right," he says. "I'll come."

Of course Colm Fahey was right all along. He really doesn't have a choice.

Chapter End Notes

comment for a neat shout-out. your friends will all be impressed.
find me on insta @fairytales_of_forever for headcanons, fic updates, and whatever other nonsense I shout into the void

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej meets an unwelcome memory.

Chapter Notes

cw for mentions of Inej's past

Just to clarify from last chapter, it's been two years since chapter 30. Over those two years, Inej and Jordan have made a few quick visits, and the eleven months is the time since their last one. Now, shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, I hope you stop screaming long enough to read this chapter XD

andyoudoctor, I really love you calling her Jordie for some reason. It's adorable.

khaki83101, hands down best trope.

Wicked333, safe to say that Kaz has realized (if not accepted) his powerlessness with these ladies around.

Seraphina9305, good! I have to intersperse plenty of fluff with the angst, after all.

reggiesswimfloaties, ALL THE HEARTS!

whynotcherries, that's the thing is that Jordan is her own facet of character growth for Kaz—beyond his trauma to the caution that he uses to keep everyone at a distance.

curlyhairedkatniss, I think Colm would agree ;)

lilieswho, welcome back! This is probably a silly thing, but I really like that you noticed him paying attention to new textures and that sort of thing. It was a little detail that I liked :D

LeoLou, I have told several people about this comment because it made me unreasonably happy.

Amiteva6, you get bonus points for the Instagram message as well! *hugs you through the internet*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most people don't feel hopeful after a meeting with Kaz Brekker. Inej, however, can't call the steady warmth coiled in her chest by any other name. It's *hope,* blissfully unfettered as she has hardly ever known it. It's something like the feeling of his fingers in the spaces between hers, like the feeling of their broken places fitting together, like the feeling of Jordan's little hand clutching hers tight.

"Are you excited about the party?" she asks Jordan, giving her daughter's hand a little squeeze. They have to go back to Fifth Harbor and check in with her crew before making the long walk to the Geldin District, so she's trying to keep Jordan happy enough that she won't pay attention to how far they have to go. Inej will probably end up carrying her anyway, though.

Jordan nods enthusiastically, making her little ponytail bob. She was ecstatic when they discovered that her hair had grown long enough to be tied back, though it's not quite braid length yet.

"Excited to be five?" Inej pushes, upping the somewhat false enthusiasm in her voice and giving Jordan's arm a little nudge. Sometimes she feels like she's floundering in this whole business of being a mother—it was never something that she'd learned or even considered amidst learning to throw knives and kill a man before he could touch her. Besides, since the Menagerie, she hadn't even thought it would be possible. She tries to remember how Mama and her aunts and cousins would speak to the little children in the caravan, but she still feels as if she's doing it all wrong.

"Mm-hmm!" says Jordan, bouncing.

Inej laughs a little. Luckily, she has a shockingly happy, patient child to learn with.

They have to pass through the Lid on their way to Fifth Harbor. Inej wonders if they'll see the new place that Kaz mentioned having opened there—supposedly a legitimate business, but Inej would be ashamed of herself if she didn't know what each of the Dregs' holdings was up to, even from the middle of the sea. There are fewer people here than in the crush of the Barrel, although Inej does feel somewhat out of place—loose mauve trousers with buttons at the calves, a cream blouse with the neck laced over her collarbones, kerchief tied over her hair. It's the kind of appearance that wouldn't garner a second look on the Staves, but among the slightly classier establishments of the Lid, it's a bit much. Hopefully she can blend in with the sailors taking the fastest path through to the heart of the Barrel.

There are still a few people on the streets—tourists, wealthy locals, and the like, as well as a handful of sailors as Inej had predicted. She scoops Jordan up and holds her close, keeping her eyes on the people around her. They look respectable enough, but she should know from Kaz that appearances are curated and only mean as much as the person wants them to.

Then she hears his voice, and her feet stop working.

She didn't think she remembered them—their voices, their faces, how they smelled. Those things were the Lynx's concern, lost to the harbor wind with all of the other misery that hangs around Ketterdam strongly enough to leave a scent. But she was wrong.

It's nasal, tenor maybe, with a scratch to it but nothing like Kaz's rasp. He's talking to some companion, but all she hears is her memories—his breathless gasps, broken Suli that he thought might impress her, "Be a good girl for me and I'll be kind."

It was a lie. They were never kind. If he were kind, he would never have paid for the rights to her body and used her as he liked. She'd heard him trying to talk down Heleen's price.

Inej can't move. She doesn't even know where he is, except that she hears that voice. She clutches Jordan tightly enough that the little girl whines, clinging to her shoulders. "Mama?"

Inej tries to find her voice. *Nothing, love,* she needs to say. *It's nothing.* But she can't speak. She can't move. She should be on her guard, checking her knives, striding by with the knowledge that she could have him bleeding out before he even saw her—all the skills of the Wraith that she knows so well. But Heleen's little lynx runs deeper. She learned long ago that it was better to give up control over herself right away instead of fighting for it, and now she's lost to that instinct.

Sankt Petyr, she thinks. *Sankta Alina.* That was probably the wrong order. She can't even remember which comes next. Her heart is beating far too fast. Is she remembering to breathe? Is she breathing? Is she alive, or just a ghost, a wraith, another victim of Ketterdam?

He's coming up the same side of the street as her. Hair the color of dried blood; peeling, sunburnt skin. There's a woman with him in lilac and lace. *Did you know that your companion likes to pay for girls like fine spices?* Inej thinks numbly. But even despite her pirate's garb and the child on her hip, the man's eyes slide right over her.

He bumps into her shoulder and keeps walking without an apology—no acknowledgement that she was even there. Was he faking for the sake of the woman with him?

Probably not, Inej thinks in muted shock. Why should he remember the face of a girl he laid with at least five years ago now? Heleen's girls were symbols, pieces of a set. The faces came and went and no one cared. They only wanted icy Fjerdan eyes, long Zemeni legs, red Kaelish hair. Inej was just another bronze-skinned, silk-swathed shell of a girl—no one and everyone, anyone they wanted her to be.

That was probably all that they saw when they looked at her daughter, too.

"Remember how you wanted a knife?" Inej murmurs into Jordan's hair. She knows the little girl can probably feel her shaking. "If Kaz doesn't get you one for your birthday, I will."

Jordan nods into her shoulder, then pokes her head up and tries to look at the people who are now well past them. "Mama, who's that?"

"No one," Inej says quietly, setting Jordan down. She starts to walk again, slowly, but her legs are shaking like mad. She keeps Jordan's hand tight in hers; if she has any say in the

matter, she is never letting go. “I just thought I’d seen him before.”

“He was mean,” Jordan says, swinging their arms. “He didn’t say sorry.”

The scent of saltwater is growing stronger as they approach the harbor, and now Inej can see the distant spikes of the docks breaking into the gray water on the horizon. She rolls her shoulders back and holds her chin up to face the meager rays of sun. “You’re right, love,” she says. “He has a lot to be sorry for.”

For some reason, she’s thinking of Pekka Rollins on his knees, fat tears rolling down his face as he fought to remember the one thing that would save his son—the name, Inej has learned, that her daughter now bears. Kaz had been obsessing over Rollins since even before Inej knew him, and yet when the moment finally came, he had to walk Rollins all the way to realizing that they had ever met.

Kaz would probably give her one of his versions of proverbs if she mentioned it to him, but maybe he would be right. People liked to set up those who had hurt them as deliberate, malicious, personal, all the better for defeating; in reality, they were just another person, chasing a few more *kruge* or a pleasure high. Not everyone might be addicted like Jesper, but they’re all slaves to a turn just as unpredictable as Makker’s Wheel, and the aftershocks are never fair in their distribution.

That’s what I’m doing, Inej reminds herself. *Making my own kind of justice.*

The world owes her nothing. Kaz taught her to take all that she could regardless. *It’s better when there’s no debt,* he’d say. *Then you can take as much as you want, instead of only what you deserve.*

Well, the least that Inej and all the girls like her deserve is a better world. The least that Jordan deserves is to never have to fear meeting her memories on the streets of Ketterdam. This city is steeped in suffering, but if Inej has her way there will be less of it to go around.

Berth twenty-two lies ahead, the *Wraith’s* flag fluttering demurely from its mast. When they reach the intersection of the cobbled street and the wooden path down to the docks, Inej gives Jordan’s shoulder a nudge. “I’ll race you to the ship.”

She can’t exactly win while they’re holding hands, but oh well. She’s not letting go of her daughter for anything.

Chapter End Notes

Happy new year! I’ll always remember 2021 as the year that I found this community and all of you wonderful people.

I posted some Kanej fanart over on my Instagram @fairytales_of_forever if any of you would like to check it out; I’m planning some more incorrect quotes-type posts, fanart,

and whatever else I may come up with, and of course messages are open if any of you want to say hi!

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan demonstrates her business skills. Kaz takes an interest in a new player in the Barrel.

Chapter Notes

I've brought you some family fluff, and *gasp* could that be a hint of *plot?* Also, of course, some shout-outs~

wicked333, we all know that Inej is doing a wonderful job as a mother; now she just has to build that confidence in herself.

andyoudoctor, I don't know if we talk enough about how incredibly brave Inej is, but I admire her endlessly for it.

simpforjamespotter, slow burn found family is the superior trope for a reason.

LeoLou, I know I've kind of said this already, but it makes me SO HAPPY when people say that my characterizations are accurate since I worry a lot about that <3

SpaceAce1123, Inej deserves all the love (and anything else her heart desires)

whynotcherries, I know I told you this already, but it means so much to me that you liked those lines!

Amiteva3, this story is as much about their journey of healing as it is about Jordan, honestly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz won’t say that he’s been making a *point* of spending more time in his office, no. But has he been doing it, nearly every day, checking the window all the while? Well, that would have to be a yes.

Inej and Jordan have only been back for a few days, so he shouldn’t really be waiting to see them—especially since Inej is always busy when she’s back in the city. She doesn’t come back to Ketterdam just for social calls, and Kaz is glad for it, because that’s who she is. Inej has always sought after something greater.

Still, her letters provide him no solace these days; he can read the same lines as many times as he wants, but knowing that she is *here,* in his city, barely more than a walk away, makes the letters feel like dead leaves in his hands. The life and the insatiable pull that he associates with Inej are gone from them, because now she is *here,* so close but as far away as she's always been. And the man who fought an entire gang and won is, of course, not brave enough to seek her out, so he waits.

It's raining again today—a miserable drizzle, barely more than a mist, the usual for Ketterdam but somehow seeming more dismal than it normally does. The skies are slate gray even above the bent and crooked awnings over the slick streets below. Kaz should be getting back to check on things at the Crow Club soon; business will be ramping up there any time now as the locals get off work and the pigeons come rolling in from the docks.

Still, he'll stay a few minutes extra—as he has for the last few days—not really doing anything, even, except hoping like the self-acknowledged fool that he is. He spares a glance at his bare hands where they rest on his desktop. They've begun to feel less naked, less like an open wound for anyone to drive deeper, but it's still an unnerving thing to catch out of the corner of his eye every once in a while.

Above the desk hangs a canvas that he's calling an invaluable abstract if anyone asks—a pioneer of a new style from Ravka by an apparently anonymous artist. Three blobs of color, a handprint, and a sun. If anyone asks him what it means, well, he just says that it's his business to steal art, not analyze it. And this particular painting happens to be priceless.

His eyes drift away from it with a shadow of fondness, and he's just about to listlessly re-shuffle his papers when he stops and tilts his head to the side. There's no sense that he can pinpoint—no sound, no shifting draft through the window, not even a scent—but his heartbeat has picked up, his hands gone still. Daring to look, Kaz turns partway around.

Inej is standing in front of the window, her hood up over her head, a secretive smile on her lips that steals Kaz's breath as surely as a hard fall. Jordan is clinging to her side, held by a sling-like scarf that she's almost grown too big for.

"I was wondering when you would make an appearance," he muses. "You're cutting it close, you know."

"I always make it in time," Inej replies, her smile widening ever so slightly. Kaz registers the slight crinkle around her eyes, the flash of white teeth, the fan of her half-lowered lashes; he can't help it. He's gone too long without seeing her, and now he doesn't want to stop. This is all far too dangerous, but it's slipping from his control.

"Why do you think I haven't been able to replace you?" says Kaz, turning his chair all the way around.

Inej sets her free hand on her hip. "Wylan had better hurry up and invent time travel, because I need to go back and inform seventeen-year-old Kaz that one day he'll admit that I'm not replaceable."

Kaz's smile fades, just barely. *I did say that, didn't I?* "No need to rub it in," he grumbles, but he doesn't contradict her. How can he?

Inej unties the sling and sets Jordan down, carding her fingers briefly through the little girl's damp hair. "You are getting too big for that," she teases. Jordan scrambles over to Kaz's desk and starts poking around underneath it, although she isn't going to find much besides crumpled pieces of paper and old pen nibs. He moves his chair over to make room for her.

"I would have thought she'd be climbing on her own by now," Kaz observes, arching an eyebrow. Inej crosses her arms, and he enjoys the old satisfaction of riling her as he used to so easily.

"She's five years old, barely, and it's raining, Kaz. Clearly, you still expect us all to be miracle workers."

"But have you ever fallen short?" asks Kaz, raising his eyebrows.

Now Inej has set her hands on her hips. His successes just keep multiplying. Kaz is sure that it's obvious how much he's enjoying himself, but oh well. "Don't you compliment me while arguing with me, Kaz."

"And why ever not? I'm a man of many talents," Kaz replies.

"We saw a man," Jordan interjects, poking her head out from under the desk.

"Don't hit your head," Kaz says gruffly, sparing a glance down at her. His eyes find Inej again. "And who was this man?"

Inej's posture straightens and she makes a point of holding his gaze. "No one."

Kaz's lips thin. He knows she's lying—that's always been her way of facing a fight, to square her shoulders, to return to the acrobat's posture that she knows best—but he can't discern whether or not it's worth pushing the subject.

"He was mean," Jordan chips in, now sitting beside Kaz's chair with her legs splayed out. "He didn't say sorry."

Kaz feels the low flame leap to life inside him, not hot enough to scorch but ready to surge at her word. "For what?" His voice is deadly calm, thin and sharp as a razor's edge.

Inej's eyes are still locked onto his, too stubborn to give a tell by looking away. "He ran into me," she says stiffly.

"You're certain you didn't know him?"

"If I did, I can protect myself," Inej says sharply, her hands tensing at her sides. She inhales deeply and her shoulders relax. "He's no threat to you, Kaz. He didn't even recognize me."

Kaz fits the pieces together, and then the gears of the lock turn at his will. He should have realized sooner. "They usually don't," he says. *Speak my brother's name and your son lives.*

He's distracted by Jordan's hand poking up over the edge of his desk and looks down at her. She's standing back up, presumably searching through his things for a toy or something she can make into one. Kaz should push her hand away, but he hasn't put his gloves back on, and her hands are wet from the rain, and he doesn't know if he wants to risk it. Inej has seen his damage whether he wanted her to or not, but he can't take the chance of falling apart in front of Jordan.

Maybe he can distract her. He's done it before. He takes a single *kruge* note from his pocket, and to Jordan's credit, that's all that it takes to get her attention. He doesn't have to say a word.

Inej sighs in the background. "I don't know how, but she learned that from you."

"Good," says Kaz. "An innate business sense will take her a long way." *It might have saved her namesake.* He shakes off the thought. He doesn't know why he keeps thinking about Jordie today, but he can wallow in all of that later. This isn't the time.

Continuing with his earlier plan, he holds the note between two fingers, twirls it, and drops the result into his palm. It's now folded into the rough shape of a bird—a crow, to be exact. He hands it to Jordan. "Keep it," he says, "but do something smart with it." He can't help chancing a look at Inej when he adds, "Never underestimate the value of a good investment."

She just rolls her eyes. "Have you been feeding my crows?" she asks.

"Since you asked," says Kaz dismissively, which isn't exactly a lie. She'd written and asked him to. What she doesn't need to know is that Kaz had been doing it long beforehand. Now, every once in a while, they'll bring by trinkets and shiny things that they find—nothing valuable, usually, except for a few brooches and tie pins and the like.

"Good." Inej moves over to lean on the end of his desk and runs her fingers through Jordan's hair. "I'll have to teach you how," she says to the little girl.

Jordan looks up curiously. "Crows?"

"That's what that is," says Kaz, nodding to the paper crow in her hands. He looks back at Inej. "I assume you have another reason for this visit?" *Not that I'm complaining.*

"Sharing information," says Inej, still leaning on the end of his desk. "What I always do." She pulls her hood back and her braid falls over her shoulder, almost brushing the tabletop. Kaz resists the urge to take his hands to it, to carefully unravel the strands, to twist the end around his fingers. He doesn't like how much he's thought about doing that.

"And that is?" he questions, arching an eyebrow. He wonders briefly if it's just an excuse, if she actually wanted to see him—it's a bizarre thought, so he doesn't give it too much consideration, but still the possibility remains.

"Have you heard about this boy who's been doing jobs for the different gangs?" she says, bending over the desk to pick up his pen and spin it between her fingers. The nimble motions of her hands are far too entrancing, and Kaz has to shift his eyes elsewhere so that he can pay

attention to what she's saying. "He's young, and he hasn't joined one yet, but he's already getting a reputation for being fast, brutal, and willing to do seemingly anything," she continues.

Sounds like someone I know, Kaz thinks. People were calling him Dirtyhands even before he joined the Dregs, although the name didn't come into common use until he started making a point of building his legend—the gloves, the suits, the ruthlessness. "Do you have a name, anything that will be useful to me?"

"His name is Felix Pieterse, or at least that's what he's going by."

"The surname is from the Southern Colonies," Kaz muses.

"He could be good for the Dregs," says Inej, setting his pen back on the desk. "You wanted a new generation of fighters like you—hungry, desperate, not held to code or conscience. He seems to fit."

"As we know, fighters like me are only satisfied with authority while it suits them," says Kaz, folding his hands in thought. "But the chance might be worth taking. Good work."

To his surprise, Inej laughs, her teeth flashing white despite the gray of the afternoon. He wasn't prepared and finds himself caught up in it, the sight and the sound, his breath taking a moment to return to him.

"I don't work for you anymore, Kaz," she teases. "And you never said that to me when I did."

He leans back in his chair and gives her the faintest of smiles. "Call it making up for lost time."

Inej leans down and takes Jordan's hand. "So we will. I'll see you at the party."

He lets his eyes slide shut as they leave, his smile refusing to fade. And maybe it doesn't have to. Maybe, as long as there's no one to see, he can take a chance, another step onto the bridge that's never broken. Maybe for them, it's worth it.

Chapter End Notes

I posted a new Kanej one-shot this week; it's on here and also on my Instagram @fairytales_of_forever, just some fluff for ya.
comment for a shout-out (all the cool kids are doing it)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Nina arrives at the Van Eck mansion. Inej reflects on all that's changed.

Chapter Notes

It’s been a big week in the Grishaverse fandom, and to add to the excitement I am back with another update—and some shout-outs~

Wicked333, character growth—we love to see it.

khaki83101, funny thing, I actually added that part in my second round of edits, but everyone loved it!

andyoudoctor, I really like your point that the chapter was a collection of little moments, because to me that’s exactly it. The investment joke, Kaz moving his chair for Jordan… all so tiny and yet impactful.

simpforjamespotter, we’re all proud of him <3

LeoLou, and we all know where she learned it ;)

whynotcherries, Jordan is indeed a smart little superhero baby.

SpaceAce1123, that’s what they are, the things unsaid <3

alltheworldisinmyhead, thank you so much for the characterization note—I worry about that a lot.

Amiteva3, healing is lots of little steps, yknow?

Blue_daises, thank you so much for reading and commenting and omg YES. I hope you enjoy the rest!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Planning Jordan’s birthday party feels unnervingly like planning a heist. Inej feels like she should almost be sitting in Kaz’s window with her feet up on the sill, tossing wild ideas to him like she tosses seed to the crows. Instead, she’s in the third-floor sitting room at Wylan’s,

which has now been dubbed the “War Room”, writing letters and measuring garlands until her hands and wrists ache.

Jesper teases her about it. “This doesn’t have to be a seamless operation, you know. This isn’t one of those plans where you die or get arrested if it goes sour.”

“I just want it to go right,” Inej protests, tipping her head back from where she’s kneeling on the floor to look pleadingly at him. “Besides, those are hardly the worst possible outcomes.”

Jesper’s brow wrinkles skeptically. “Oh?”

Inej deepens her voice in a poor imitation of roughness that scratches her throat. “Of course not. The worst thing is if we don’t get our money.”

Jesper practically cackles. “The resemblance is uncanny. You’re even doing the scowl right.”

“Am I?”

“Nope,” says Jesper, grinning impishly. “Not scary enough.”

“I’m terrifying.”

“I believe that,” he replies. “But you’re terrifying as you, not as Kaz.” He makes as if to leave, but he’s making enough of a presentation about it that Inej waits skeptically before turning back to work. As she expected, he reaches the door and casually adds, “By the way, Nina’s here.”

Inej leaps to her feet, her work forgotten. “Nina?”

“That’s what I said the first time,” Jesper says in amusement, standing aside to let her pass. “Walking up the steps as we speak.”

Inej pauses at the top of the stairs and peers back down the hallway at him. “Jordan is still with Wylan, right?”

“And determined to ruin any and all surprises, yes,” says Jesper. He flicks his hand at her. “Go on.”

Inej can’t even pretend that she needs any more prompting. She forgoes the stairs entirely, instead leaping to the banister and sliding the whole way down.

It only takes a few light steps to get from the main landing to the foyer where Nina is waiting, her hair artfully mussed by the wind but somehow looking as if she meant for it to be exactly that way. She looks more tired than Inej remembers—the old sparkle in her eyes is subtle, dormant—but the apples of her cheeks are flushed rosy and her smile is as brilliant as always. “Inej!” she cries, dropping her bag.

Inej doesn’t answer, instead flinging herself into her best friend’s arms, where she is pillowed by Nina’s strong embrace. She stands on her toes to rest her head against Nina’s shoulder. “I missed you.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Nina pulls back and cups Inej’s face in her hands. “Look at you. Captain Inej.” She pushes a few stray hairs back into Inej’s braid, and even though Tailoring has never been Nina’s power and certainly isn’t now, Inej believes that they’ll stay.

“How are things in the icy north?” Inej asks, teasing gently.

“Icy,” Nina replies. “Better, though. Better than before.”

As glad as Inej is to see her friend’s old smile, there is something in Nina’s face that she feels sure must be reflected in her own—the time has touched them, roughed them up, made them tired. They thought that they were hardened by reality before, but in truth they were still wild and desperate in the way of all teenagers who like to play with risk and immortality. Knowing better has stripped even that away from them. They’re hovering around twenty-one and world-weary already. A nameless sadness surges in Inej, one that has no place here.

Nina links arms with her and together they walk towards the firelit sitting room that opens to the grand staircase. “Oh, and how’s Kaz? I can’t believe I’m asking after him, but—”

“Still an idiot,” says Inej with a soft smile. She can’t deny or hide the fondness that laces her voice. She still feels his touch against her hand. She still sees the cautious light creep back into his eyes.

“So, better?” Nina asks, bumping an arm against her side. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“And you will,” says Inej, stopping beside one of the chairs. “He’s coming to the party.”

Nina barely has time to look surprised before Jordan comes scurrying down the stairs. “Mama—”

Nina raises her eyebrows and looks back at Inej. “ *That* much better?”

Inej sighs heavily, but she still feels herself blush. She sinks into the chair and holds out a hand to Jordan. “You were supposed to stay upstairs, love.” To Nina, she says, “It’s not like that. Besides, I told you what the party was for, so it’s not like you’re surprised.”

Nina comes to stand beside the chair, regarding Jordan carefully. “No, I just—she looks more like you than I thought.”

Neither speaks of the wicked cleverness in Jordan’s eyes that reminds them of someone else.

“Coincidence, I suppose,” says Inej, smoothing Jordan’s hair. “My crew rescued her. She needed me.”

“I believe you. You know I do,” says Nina. “She’s in good hands.” Inej’s heart swells with gratitude. She should have known that her friend would understand.

Jordan is looking shyly at Nina, clinging to Inej’s leg. Inej looks down at her. “This is Nina,” she says. “One of my best friends.”

She sneaks a look out of the corner of her eye at Nina, who's beaming, and adds in a stage whisper to Jordan, "She gives the best hugs."

"I like hugs," Jordan says warily, taking a careful step forward.

Nina comes around the side of the chair and kneels in front of her. There's nervousness in her smile, and Inej can't help but feel amused.

Jordan takes another step, then another, then carefully grasps a strand of Nina's hair. Nina shoots a look at Inej out of the corner of her eye; Inej just smiles.

Apparently, having long, pretty hair is good enough for Jordan, because she rushes into Nina's arms. Nina's nervous smile grows full and startled, a sudden and vibrant thing like a firework, and Inej laughs.

<><><>

The house is filling, and Inej is relieved to find that she hasn't yet grown soft. It's like a familiar dance—being in constant motion, doing five things at once and thinking about several more, darting from one place to the next when a new problem arises. It's exhilarating. Jesper is doing as much as he can and keeping up gamely with her pace; she remembers fighting by his side, the way a shoot-out could make him seem like he'd been struck by lightning, his hair sticking up and all. Now she can toss out instructions to him and trust that he'll get where she needs him more quickly than she can.

She's interrupted in the middle of counting servings in the kitchen by Wylan this time, who she'll dare say seems to being enjoying the chaos as well. He ruffles his red-gold curls and fixes his collar. "Just to let you know, I think your parents are here."

Inej looks up abruptly. A few more stray hairs fly into her face and she smoothes them back with some irritation. "Can you let them know that I'm almost done here? Or—" She looks over the plates and platters again. *That's probably enough.* If she can take the kind of risk that involves climbing six stories up a recently-run incinerator, she can guess at the amount of food needed for a child's birthday party.

Inej pauses before rushing out the door, however. "Where's Jordan?"

"Still upstairs," says Wylan, "not that she's happy about it. At least Mother doesn't mind."

Inej can't quite hold back a smile. "Will Marya be joining us later?"

He shakes his head, trying to look unbothered. "Too many people."

Inej sets a hand on Wylan's shoulder and meets his eyes. "That's all right. She's doing better. I've seen it."

He gives a brave half-smile. "I know. It's just that she used to love parties—performing for everyone. She told me one day, once I got good enough, I could play for her and she'd sing."

“Maybe you can try if things quiet down later,” says Inej, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “If not, you can play and Nina and I will sing. We’ll make you sound good.”

At that, he laughs a little. “I already sound good. Go on, go see your parents.”

Inej grins at him. “I think Jesper is rubbing off on you.” But it doesn’t take any more prompting for her to walk quickly out to the foyer. During her first few stays with Jesper and Wylan, the enormous house had seemed like somewhat of a maze, but by now she could probably navigate it in the dark.

By the time she gets there, Nina is already conversing with her parents in Suli. Inej feels a sudden rush of gratitude again for her friend and quickens her stride to join them.

“ *Meja,”* her mother greets her, pressing a kiss to Inej’s forehead. Her father wraps her in a brief but strong embrace.

Like she’d seen in Colm, they look comfortingly unchanged. Inej is reluctant to leave her father’s embrace.

“I’m glad you’ve met Nina,” she says, the language of her birth sliding easily from her tongue. “Now my family by blood shared has met my family by blood shed.”

“It sounds so serious when you say it like that,” Nina teases.

“But it’s true,” Inej replies, her heart full with her family around her. Now Kaz just needs to get here and it will be like it used to be.

Well, not really.

Inej feels a sudden burst of fear that somehow it will be worse—that being together again will make them feel too keenly what’s missing. They are not the same reckless children who would take on the world for freedom and vengeance and gold. They are not the same children who loved each other desperately, fiercely, foolishly, and lost to the hand of the odds. They were so vibrant, so vivid and alive even when everything seemed to say that they shouldn’t be. They could only live in defiance for so long.

Inej takes Nina’s hand and grips it tight. Even if it’s terrible, even if they’re not the silver six anymore, they can still love each other with all the defiance and desperation that they once had. They can still look a world in the eye that won’t notice their loss and demand to be noticed. They can still rob justice itself and win by their own rules. It’s not too late.

Her parents are talking still. Inej drops her head onto Nina’s shoulder. “No mourners,” she whispers.

Nina squeezes her hand. “No funerals.”

Chapter End Notes

Note: I haven't read Rule of Wolves, so I'm being vague about what Nina's been up to.

If you want to see what I've been up to, check out my Instagram @fairytales_of_forever. Next chapter is the party!

Inej

Chapter Summary

Jordan has a birthday.

Chapter Notes

It's party time! Not just for Jordan, but for all the s&b info this week—and I also want to celebrate your lovely comments with some shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, hey—it wouldn't be me if there wasn't some angst, right? ;)

khaki83101, you finally get to find out if you were right!

wicked333, yesss, I was so excited to bring Nina into the story!

andyoudoctor, me @ the characters: and YOU get character growth! And YOU get character growth!

whynotcherries, writing Jordan with all of the other crows makes my heart so happy.

Itsyagirlkath, here is a new update just for you! Your comment was so incredibly sweet <3

LeoLou, well, wait no more to see that reaction! I hope you like it!

spud, welcome, and thank you for your sweet comment, it made my day!

SpaceAce1123, well, now I want to read RoW...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej knows when he arrives. She doesn't know how exactly, since Kaz doesn't make a habit of announcing himself, but she does. She's sitting in the main parlor with her parents and Jordan, smiling while her mother fusses over the little girl. This motherly pride is a new and welcome feeling; every time someone tells her that Jordan is a beautiful, healthy child, or *oh look how clever she is,* Inej finds herself smiling and standing a bit straighter. She's fretted about this to Nina. "I look like a proud hen, don't I?"

Nina, loyal Nina, cups her face with one hand. "You look happy, Inej. It's long overdue."

Inej knows she's once again smiling in spite of herself, though for a different reason, when she rises, murmuring to Mama that she'll be back in a minute. When her light steps carry her over the short distance to the foyer, that smile only grows. He's here.

Kaz turns automatically to her in the middle of fending off a maid who is insisting upon taking his hat. The maid takes advantage of his distraction to finally snap it up and hang it on a hook, despite Kaz's impressive glare.

His hands are tucked into his pockets, the set of his shoulders high and his expression endearingly wary. He has a parcel tucked under one arm, and when he draws the other hand free to take up his cane, it's bare. Inej forces herself to walk instead of running to him as her heart is suddenly so desperate to do.

"You came," she says, more breathlessly than she wants to.

He gives her a look of mock disappointment. "You underestimate me." Inej isn't sure if anyone who knows him less would notice, but she senses the nervousness beneath his sleek, intimidating facade. She isn't sure if she should be proud of him, but oh, she is.

She arches an eyebrow the way that he does, teasing. "Do I? Oh, and my parents have been asking after you."

He hesitates. Inej wants to laugh. "Asking what?" he questions carefully.

"Everything from how you're doing to if we're married yet," Inej says as if it's of no consequence to her. In truth, she's probably blushing, and if Nina were here she'd laugh.

"Ah," says Kaz. "I see." He gives her a sideways look as they begin to walk to the parlor. "What's funny?"

"Nothing really," Inej replies. The sudden longing to take his hand, to rest her head on his shoulder, swells in her without warning, and her breath almost stutters before she regains herself. "I'm just happy. That's all."

Kaz is silent for a moment, and then he says, "Good. That's good."

They've reached the others by now, and Nina is the first to look up when she sees them. She gets to her feet and strides over with the old confidence and presence that Inej remembers. She gives Kaz a critical look. "Brekker."

He levels his gaze imperiously at her. "Zenik."

Inej takes Nina's arm. "Good to see that we're all friends again."

"His haircut is still terrible," Nina stage-whispers to her.

"And perhaps one day I'll make room in my schedule to care," Kaz says drily as they join the circle around Jordan, where Inej finds herself tucked in between him and Nina.

Wylan had given Jordan one of her presents early, essentially as a bribe to stay upstairs; it turns out to be a puzzle, which she is now working on in deep contemplation—at least until she sees Kaz. She waves a puzzle piece at him. “Da! Help me.”

Inej is amused to see Kaz, who normally makes himself the center of attention, seem slightly disconcerted at the eyes now landing on him. Nina elbows her side. “Da?” she whispers.

“That was Jordan’s idea,” Inej replies.

“But he isn’t stopping her, is he?” Nina replies. Inej follows her eyes to Kaz, who is levering himself down with his cane to sit beside Jordan.

“No,” says Inej, a soft smile gracing her face. “That’s true.”

They stand and watch as Kaz takes the puzzle piece from Jordan, careful not to touch her hand as he does, and points out the space that it fits into. He says something quiet to her that makes her burst into giggles.

Inej hears Nina gasp quietly next to her. “When did he stop wearing the gloves?”

“Just around me,” says Inej. “This is…this is new.”

Nina tilts her head. “I don’t know what I was expecting. Scars or something, maybe.”

There are scars, Inej thinks, *you just can’t see them.*

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The attention of the group is stolen when Jesper comes down the stairs, his arms full. “Since everyone’s here, I thought we’d do presents.”

“How thoughtless,” says Kaz, who is still sitting with Jordan. “I haven’t so much as looked at a tea sandwich.”

“Presents?” says Jordan.

“Ignore him,” Inej tells Jesper.

Her mother nods wisely. “I used to say this to your father, all the time.” Her Kerch is much improved, but her accent is still slow and careful. Inej ignores the less-than-subtle hint.

While Jesper comes over with the bundle of presents, Kaz picks up his cane again and takes the chair that Inej is standing next to. She looks briefly down at him, but the glance he returns is certain.

Jesper sets the pile down on an empty couch and takes a flat box off the top. “Mine first, since I’m doing all the work.”

“Saving the best for last, I see,” Kaz muses. He doesn’t smile, but there’s a touch of mischief in his voice.

Jesper scowls. “Rude. At least Jordan will be nice to me when she opens this.”

“No I won’t,” Jordan says happily.

“ *Jordan.* ” Inej refuses to laugh, despite her daughter’s mastery of the innocent look.

“Everyone is bullying me today,” Jesper laments as he passes the box over to Jordan, crouching beside her.

Jordan sticks her tongue out of the corner of her mouth in concentration and grabs the wrapping at the corner, from which she tears it off in one pull.

Inej leans on the back of Kaz’s chair. “No manners,” she comments teasingly.

He lifts one shoulder in a half shrug. “She’s a little crow.”

Jordan pulls the lid off of the box and paws through the paper until she pulls out a pair of tiny black slippers with nubbly rubber soles.

“Fabrikator made,” Jesper says with a twinkle in his eye.

“I finally talked him into some training,” Wylan adds from his position in the background, rather proudly.

Inej goes to kneel beside Jordan and takes the little shoes in her hands. “You can use these to climb with me,” she explains.

Jordan squeals happily. “I’m gonna be better than you!”

“Patience, *meja* ,” Inej says with a laugh. “Come here. Let’s see how they fit.”

Jordan plops down, her legs stuck out in front of her; she’s already barefoot, so Inej helps her slip the shoes on.

“Fits like a glove,” says Jesper with a wink in Kaz’s direction. Kaz rolls his eyes. Jordan is happily wiggling her feet.

“What do we say?” Inej coaches.

“Thank you!” Jordan chirps. Jesper beams back at her.

“Now if only Kaz could be that easily trained,” Nina says.

“People aren’t in the habit of giving me things,” Kaz says smoothly. “That would be why I’m in the business of taking them.”

Inej stays quiet, looking around the circle. All of a sudden, her heart seems so full that her throat closes, and even if she wanted to say anything else, she couldn’t. This is her family—her parents pressed together on the loveseat, Nina with that old shine in her eyes, Jesper using his gift at last, Wylan looking on with pride, Jordan with her precious shoes, and of course

Kaz, sitting back from the group, a quiet affection in his gaze that perhaps only Inej can sense.

“Since none of us believe Kaz but nobody wants to argue with him, who wants to go next?” says Jesper from his seat on the floor.

“Here,” says her father, passing a package down to Inej, who hands it to Jordan. It’s wrapped in a length of embroidered fabric—one of her mother’s scarves, she thinks, patterned with wild geraniums.

“Careful,” she instructs to Jordan, gently unwrapping the scarf herself before allowing Jordan to open the box.

“Keep it,” her mother says in Suli. “You are a mother now, Inej.”

Inej nods, the scarf clutched in her hands, not trusting herself to speak.

Jordan gasps delightedly when she opens the box, and Inej’s heart stutters when she realizes what’s inside. It’s a dress—one of her old costumes—royal blue silk embroidered in shimmering gold.

“It is not practical,” her father admits in careful Kerch, “but little girls should have pretty things.”

“Pretty,” Jordan agrees, turning the dress in her little hands so that the embroidery glitters in the light. “Thank you!”

Inej kisses the crown of her daughter’s head. “Good girl.” She knows it’s just a dress, but all the same, she wants desperately for Jordan to have the childhood that she lost. Maybe this is a small part of that. Jordan should never have to ration joy by what serves another purpose. She should have pretty things for the sake of having them. She should love because she can.

“I already gave her mine,” Wylan says with his hands up. “Who’s next?”

“All right,” says Nina, “My turn.” She picks up a rather lumpy parcel off of the pile that Jesper brought down and bends to hand it to Jordan.

“Soft,” Jordan says thoughtfully as she turns the parcel over, poking experimentally at the paper.

“It’s not a puzzle, it’s a present,” Nina teases, one hand set on her hip as she stands to watch. “I know who *you’ve* been spending too much time with. Stop trying to look innocent, Kaz, it’s not in your nature.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” says Kaz, who admittedly has not belonged in the same sentence as the word *innocent* in anyone’s memory.

Meanwhile, Jordan has torn into the package and pulled out a beautiful red coat, made of some kind of wool and lined with pale brown fur. She pets the inside and her eyes go wide. “*Really* soft.”

“Oh, it is beautiful,” Mama puts in.

“Glad you like it,” Nina says proudly. “Apparently good things come out of Fjerda after all.”

“Perhaps they just take some training,” Kaz muses quietly. Inej isn’t even sure that Nina hears him.

She turns back to face him and rests an elbow on his chair, beside his knee. “Maybe now she’ll stop stealing yours.”

Kaz shakes his head, although he seems vaguely amused. “I don’t believe in chasing empty dreams, Inej.”

“It’s at least somewhat waterproof,” Nina says from her position beside Wylan. “Meant for snow, but I thought it could also work for sea spray—or Ketterdam rain,” she notes with a meaningful look at Inej. “Oh, and look in the box, there’s something else in there.”

“More presents?” says Jordan eagerly, making everyone laugh. She investigates the box and pulls out a silver hairpin in the shape of an ornate feather. “It’s shiny!”

Inej, still leaning on Kaz’s chair, turns back to him. “She really is a little crow, isn’t she?” she says softly.

His nod is so faint as to be imperceptible, but it still makes Inej smile.

“Jesper,” she says, “can you pass me that thin box on the top? The one wrapped in red.”

Jesper gets up and picks up the package she indicated, leaning over with one long arm to pass it to her before sitting down beside the last remaining parcel.

Inej, from there, sets it in Jordan’s lap. “Do you remember what I promised?” she asks.

Jordan’s eyes go wide. “Knife?” she whispers.

Inej smiles conspiratorially. “Shh. Open it and see.”

Much more carefully than she’s handled any of the others, Jordan peels off the red paper and lifts the lid away from the box. From the velvet lining, she lifts a small, slender blade—a letter opener, in essence—the handle silver engraved with red. Ever so gently, she turns it back and forth, watching it catch and reflect the light. Her little mouth is open in an expression of wonder. “Thank you, Mama!” she says, smiling widely at Inej.

Inej feels her parents’ eyes on her. She can’t bring herself to look at them—she knows what they’re thinking.

“That is…unusual,” her father says in Suli, in the tone he would use with her when she was a child and he wanted to correct her without her getting upset.

“I want her to be able to protect herself,” Inej returns, trying to stay quiet despite the fact that nobody can understand what they’re saying.

To her surprise, she hears Kaz speak up from behind her, although in Kerch. “It’s practical. We’ve been writing. She can open the letters without mutilating them like those presents.”

Inej turns to face him in silent gratitude. She knows what it must have cost him to admit their communication, even in front of people he should trust. She prays that they won’t make a fuss about it.

“Oh, you have, have you?” Jesper says mischievously. “Inej, where’ve you been hiding all those perfumed love letters?”

Inej runs a hand over her face. “Saints’ sake, Jesper, it’s just an exchange of information. Ketterdam happens to be a popular place for bounty hunters.”

Jesper opens his mouth, probably to continue with his teasing, but Wylan’s hand lands on his shoulder and he stops. Instead, he picks up the last package. “All right, boss, you’re up.”

Nina laughs, full and warm the way Inej remembers. “We don’t work for him anymore, thank the Saints.”

“If anyone knows old habits die hard, it’s me,” Jesper says with a grin. Wylan shakes his head, but he’s smiling.

Jesper gets up and sets the small box into Kaz’s hand. He does a double-take when he notices the lack of gloves, but Inej gives him a look, imploring not to say anything. She can feel the tension radiating off of Kaz and doesn’t want to damage his efforts.

Once Jesper sits back down, Kaz leans forward, one elbow resting on his knee, and hands the box down to Jordan. It’s black, unassuming and plain. Even still, it’s a mark of her bewildering love for Kaz that she immediately sets the knife box down and takes it.

Everyone seems awfully quiet as Jordan opens the box. The first thing she pulls out is a small, white paper bag with colorful sweets inside. She gasps. “Candy!”

“Oh,” Mama says with interest. “Where do you buy this?”

There is quite a bit of muffled snickering. “Oh yes, Kaz,” Nina says devilishly, “where did you *buy* that? With good, honest *kruge,* of course?”

“You know I never reveal my secrets,” says Kaz, perfectly serious.

Jordan, meanwhile, has lifted the second thing out of the box. It’s a pocket watch—weathered, probably ten years old at least, and when she opens it there are faded planets around the edges of the face.

“You would give a five-year-old a watch, wouldn’t you?” says Nina.

“It’ll last her,” says Kaz, cold and calm, but Inej is looking over Jordan’s shoulder at the watch. On the back, there’s an old engraving: the letters J.R.

Inej is reminded of Kaz's *R* tattoo and her old wonderings of what it might mean. Could that *J* stand for *Jordie?*

"Tell him thank you," she says to Jordan, softly. "This present is very special."

"Thank you," Jordan recites. She looks up inquiringly at Kaz. "J," she says. "J is for Jordan?"

His bare hands twist in his lap. Something in his eyes flickers like the shadows of a candle's flame. "Yes," he says, his rasp rough and dry. "That's right."

Chapter End Notes

GUYS. We have FANART. go look at it!!! If you feel inspired to draw your own, be sure to tag me so I can see it!

Speaking of which, I post my own fanart, incorrect quotes, story updates, and whatever else might strike my fancy on my instagram <3

One more thing, I posted a new one-shot this week—some pre-canon feral teen Kaz and one very terrified fabrikator. Go check it out :D

Comments make me do a little happy dance ;)

Kaz

Chapter Summary

The Crows wonder how things mights have been. Kaz tells his story.

Chapter Notes

WOW. I love you guys so much. The response to the last chapter was amazing, and fully deserving of these shout-outs!
wicked333, I mean, his gift had to be something dramatic, didn't it?
Violetstar5, trust me, I'm thrilled that you're enjoying it! Your comments are so sweet <3
khaki83101, well, kaz does have a gift for puzzles ;)
hardly_a_ghost, and he would fully deny it if you told him so.
andyoudoctor, as much as I loved Kaz's character development, I think my favorite part was that good good crows banter.
Slightly, so excited to see you commenting! I love all of you who enjoy the fic in your own spaces as much as those who interact, and it's wonderful to hear from you <3
itsyagirlkath, the ghafas are really just stand-ins for us, aren't they? XD
whynotcherries, I know I sort of said this already, but I knew that if anyone would figure out the bit with Jordie's watch, it would be you, lol.
Andhehe, that's so sweet! I'm really happy that you're enjoying the fic <3
Carolina, this comment gave me a whole crisis because there are people all over the world reading my silly little words?? What???
LeoLou, I figured that the crows and my readers all deserved some joy <3
Amiteva3, eeee I'm glad you liked that line!!
curlyhairedkatniss, Jesper is obviously secondary to this fic but I'm so interested in how he might have learned to use his powers, so here we are.
SpaceAce1123, found family reigns superior!
Searchingforwonderland13, yeah, it's been a long time coming <3
whenlifegivesyoulemons, you really know how to make an author's day, don't you? ;)
simpforjamespotter, character growth: we love to see it.
deanie_decked_out, welcome! I hope you stick around <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The evening has burned low, the city outside the windows dark beyond the yellow light of the streetlamps. Inej's parents have retired to their hotel, and after being allowed to stay up late, Jordan has sometime since gone to bed. Soft voices and the click of glasses sink into the

walls of the parlor, and in the shadows that press against the ring of fireglow, the years seem to encroach on those who remain. The chatter and banter from earlier has ebbed away, and Kaz can't discern whether this quiet is the quiet of a church, of a library, or of a graveside. Maybe it doesn't matter. There is reverence in what the time has made of them.

The glass is cold in his bare hand. Kaz isn't sure why his mind fixates on that detail, but it lingers in the background of his thoughts—a simple sensation, really. But it's like taking off gray glasses after more than a decade and seeing the colors of the world again.

Well, Ketterdam wouldn't look much different, he thinks wryly.

Jesper tilts his head back and drains what's left in his glass. Even in these quiet hours, he does everything all in—with energy and vibrance. Tucked in beside him, Wylan is swirling his glass but hasn't raised it to his lips in a good fifteen minutes.

On the couch opposite, the one beside Kaz's chair, Inej is next to Nina, close to her side. They look so comfortable, casual. Kaz isn't in the habit of avoiding ugly feelings—he tends to embrace them, ride them out, let them make him the monster and deal with the effects after—but this twisted, far from simple jealousy is something he doesn't want to dwell on. It's hardly Inej's fault that everyone else can embrace her should she so choose. But the thoughts have gotten worse for him, images and fantasies, like some new kind of torture—he can nearly feel what it would be like, the heat of her skin, her taut muscles, the press of her lips. He needs her to leave, but he needs her to stay. He needs her.

"It's all so different," she says quietly. Kaz watches her, time slow and thick as syrup, the firelight catching on strands of her hair and making them look like spun gold. "It feels different."

"Better in some ways," Wylan says thoughtfully, his eyes trailing to Jesper beside him.

"And worse in others," Nina adds quietly. Kaz doesn't remember her ever being subdued that way. As unnecessary as he might have found her extravagance before, this is almost unnerving.

"I wonder if things could have happened any other way," says Jesper, his fingers drifting over the buttons of his obnoxious paisley waistcoat. "If we still would have…I don't know."

"Met? Changed anything? Taken on the world?" Nina suggests.

Inej's eyes are half-lidded in thought. "Not unless you all came to Ravka. I would have stayed as an acrobat."

"We could've all joined the circus," Jesper suggests with half a grin. "Maybe I could talk my da into it instead of sending me to university. Wy could do pyrotechnics."

"Running away to join the circus? My father would be thrilled. I'd also make a very good clown," Wylan says seriously, pulling on a strand of his hair.

"I'd be a clown with you," says Nina. "Or a waffle vendor."

Inej rests her head on Nina's shoulder. Kaz feels an unpleasant swoop in his gut. "You could be a Grisha mystic," she says with a slow smile like the unwrapping of a secret.

None of them mentions Matthias. Kaz isn't about to.

Wylan looks over at him. "What about you, Kaz?"

Jordie would still be alive. Too smart for school, he said. He could do anything he wanted. I could do magic.

"It doesn't matter," Kaz says flatly. "It only happened one way. It's a waste of time to wonder how else things could have gone." *I've wasted too much time doing that already.*

Nina frowns at him. "It's not really about—"

"Card tricks," says Inej. He's not sure if that's the firelight reflected in her dark eyes or a glitter of mischief, but he's fully ensnared either way. "Or you could always be a clown with Nina and Wylan." Her smile shows a brief flash of white teeth, the edge of a laugh, the beginning of something terrifying.

"I think anyone would pay to see that," Jesper snorts. "I would."

"Not enough money in the world," Kaz says firmly.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that," says Nina. "We did almost die for thirty million *kruge.* "

Kaz gives her a sardonic smile. "So what? We almost die every day."

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They're drifting apart, saying their goodbyes, and still he lingers. Inej knows, of course. She returns from talking to Nina and regards him carefully—waiting, he knows, for him to speak. But he can't figure out what he wants to say. He doesn't even know if he wants to stay. Well, maybe he does—desperately.

"I have to go back," he says, but she knows as well as he does that he's making no motion to leave. *Keep me here. Draw the time out. Make some excuse. Please.*

"But not yet," Inej finishes cautiously, her eyes studying him. He feels utterly exposed and is surprised to find that he doesn't mind it.

He inhales, forces himself to say it. "No. Not just yet, Inej." Didn't he say those words on another night, impossibly long ago? Is there that much difference between asking her to stay and saying that he will?

"Good," she says decisively, her eyes never leaving his face. "Come back to the roof with me."

I would follow you anywhere. I would follow you to the end of the world.

When they make it out the window and onto the roof—Kaz doing so without much grace—a soft wind is blowing, cold but not biting, promising spring rains to come. If only they could wash the suffering from this city.

Inej has wrapped her mother's scarf over her hair, but it's slipped back a bit from her golden brow, framing her face, the ends draped over her shoulders. "Did you want to say something?"

Anything. Anything that will keep me here with you, that will stave off the time when I have to let you go again.

"She'll understand the watch later," he says at last, looking out over the dim lights of his city, the dark lines of the canals. The harbor is calling to him, asking to be known.

Inej is silent for a moment. He can feel her beside him, the breath between their shoulders. "Will I?" she asks.

Kaz looks down at the tiles, at his hands, white and bare. The tightness in his chest is foreign, and it doesn't feel like his own voice speaking when he says, "I'm going to tell you."

Inej turns to face him. The ends of the scarf flutter in the breeze. Kaz thinks distantly of catching one. "Then tell me." It's an invitation, not a command. *Go on. Finish the story.*

"I don't—where do I—" He's already starting to panic, his breath running away from him as he grasps uselessly for a place to start. He flexes his hands and forces a steadying breath. "Normally, the Council and the stadwatch don't care much for keeping the Barrel clean, never mind that it's impossible. But during a plague you end up with bodies in the streets." He stumbles over the word *bodies,* images of white limbs and gray eyes rising into his vision. He tastes bile.

He can't look at Inej, but he can feel her eyes on him. He doesn't know who he is now, without his gloves, with his cane downstairs, with no anchor but the city half-lit before him and Inej steady at his side. He's afraid that he is no longer someone strong enough to keep her safe, if he ever was.

But he has to go on. No matter what she says or thinks of him, or if he falls apart right here with no one but the yellow moon and his keeper of secrets to know, he can't stop. "We were holed up together. Just some boxes that we called the Nest. Maybe it was something to do with crows even then, I—I got a splinter and Jordie pulled it out when he was still strong enough." His eyes are wide and unseeing. He knows perfectly well that he's spouting nonsense, hiding himself in unimportant details as if he can escape having to confess what happened next.

"I didn't know he was dead. The—the fever. They didn't know I was alive, so they took us both." It's not cold, but he's shivering like mad, his sentences degenerating into as many words as he can spit out at a time. The sickness is worse now, heavy and horrible. The bodies rise in the dark water. The harbor will be patient with its vengeance.

“Kaz.” Inej’s voice is an echo, a beam from the surface, something he no longer hears or understands. He can’t stop talking.

“Took me out to the Reaper’s Barge. I was—no one heard so I—I was too small. Jordie was there. He was dead. I had to swim. Too small for that too.” He’s a child again, lost in the waves, no one to listen or care. Sinking, drowning, and the voice he hears is just another echo in the storm.

“Kaz.”

“Jordie could still save me,” he says, almost stubborn now. His voice is a child’s voice, his throat rough from plague and saltwater, his lungs starving for air. “Corpses float.”

“ *Kaz.* ”

He closes his eyes. He’s shaking so badly that he doesn’t know how he’s staying upright. This was a mistake. He should never have said anything. He should have left while he had the chance. And now he has nothing to regain his pride, no sin with which to scare her off, no horror to prove that he’s a monster and not a scared little boy. Why did he ever show it all to her? Why did he ever put the full truth of who he was, the child and the terror, into her hands? Now he can’t do anything but drown. Now she can do with it what she will.

“Sit,” she says. “It’s flat here.”

The rotting eyes are still fixed on him, the hands still clinging, the water cold. “I don’t need to sit down.”

“Fine,” she says. “But do it anyway.”

Kaz sinks down and folds his arms over his knees, dropping his head onto them. He isn’t sure he’s breathing right, or at all.

He feels the air shift as Inej sits beside him. She doesn’t say anything about the story. He continues to sink in the waves. The undertow is stronger than a fading dream of golden eyes in the firelight. But at least she knows.

Something touches his hand. His head raises, eyes wide.

It’s Inej. She’s wrapped the patterned scarf around her hand and is covering his with it—an anchor, a layer of safety.

Kaz stares at her, trembling. He no longer feels like himself. He can’t trust himself to speak, even if he could think of what to say.

“Thank you,” says Inej. The harbor wind murmurs on, but now her voice is in its song. The same voice that has brought him back from the dark every time. “Thank you for telling me.”

Kaz turns his face to the harbor, barely more than a shine against the black sky now. He’s always marked that desperate day on the Reaper’s Barge as the moment of his rebirth, the remaking of a boy into a monster. But maybe there was another day that reformed him again,

slow and painful as a chrysalis, all catalyzed by the words “I can help you.” Maybe by the molding of her hands, by saving himself from the harbor this time around, he’s become something new again.

Chapter End Notes

What’s that? You want to read a story where they join the circus and they’re all happy? Well, as it happens, I wrote one: it’s called “renegades in the ring” if you’re interested :D
As always, be sure to check out the fun stuff on my instagram @fairytales_of_forever !
I know I’ve said this before, but I can’t say it enough: you all mean so much to me. Your feedback makes this story so much fun to write, and I wouldn’t have gotten this far without you. <3

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz meets a stranger with a familiar story.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! I'm back with another chapter and some shout-outs~
bem_te_vi, I'm glad my version measured up, hehe.

wicked333, it's a complicated game, this whole trust thing, but they're figuring it out.

andyoudoctor, I think something that you pointed out so well is how that chapter is just saturated with the past. From the crows being back together and feeling what's changed, to them imagining how things could have been different, to of course Kaz telling his story.

khaki83101, it wasn't even the original plan for that chapter, but it was what Kaz wanted to do, so I went with it, lol.

whynotcherries, I'm really glad that it was accurate in that respect! These characters are just so deliciously complex.

LeoLou, if it makes you feel better, now we're both crying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz has enough to do that he's no longer full-time floor boss at the Crow Club, but he does like to keep an eye on things. After all, it's that place and Fifth Harbor that brought the Dregs up from the laughingstock they'd been under Haskell, and he doesn't mind taking pride in them. The Silver Six means something else to him; his Crows can tease him about the name, but it was just too fitting to rename Rollins' so-called palace after the team that bested him.

It's the beginning of the busy hours, and the lamp-lit club is filling with people and noise, just the way Kaz likes it. They know to give him a wide berth, which amuses and relieves him in tandem; aside from the prickling of his skin at any proximity, he has better visibility of the tables and the dealers this way.

It gives him a restless sort of comfort to be here, in full view of something built by the man he has become. For over a decade, his life has been split into distinct halves: the boy and the

monster, the child and the terror, a name that had a home and a name he'd stolen like everything else. Before the harbor and after. With Jordie and without him. Kaz Brekker had never known any place besides this city, the twisting alleys and black canals, and at some point or other he'd bought into his own myth, he thinks. But since that night on the roof, since he told Inej everything, the halves of his life have begun to bleed like the ink from his first cheap gloves. The slow fusion of Brekker and Rietveld into a man who can be neither is now stark in his notice.

"Boss," says Maikel. If his thinking face is as obvious as Jesper says, Kaz would love to know why people interrupt him anyway. He stares coldly at Maikel's face, waiting for him to speak.

"You wanted any information on that Pieterse kid," the new bruiser states, pressing on stubbornly. "The little spiders tracked him and he's headed for Fifth Harbor, probably to sabotage shipments. If we send someone—"

Maikel is useful, but overeager. He'll have to learn the skill of intricacy. "Guard the door," says Kaz, already heading out past him. At least the bruiser has sense to not complain.

<><><>

He makes no secret of himself. Felix Pieterse has been an annoyance to the Dregs since shortly after Inej first heard about him—skimming off of their shipments, roughing up lower-ranking members, and generally making himself a thorn in Kaz's side. It feels personal, and Kaz intends to find out why.

He doesn't have to search for long; he's only been walking along the docks of Fifth Harbor for a few minutes when he sees a boy sitting on a stack of crates, tucked between a pair of warehouses. The kid can't be more than sixteen, his clothes and thick sheaf of dark hair roughed up and mussed.

If Kaz hadn't been sure of his theory before, he is now: the boy's eyes are black with hate. It's an expression of which Kaz knows every line.

He stops at the base of the crates and folds his gloved hands neatly over the head of his cane, his head tilted ever so slightly to the side. He'll let Felix open the negotiations; he clearly has something to say.

Felix is crouched on the front of his toes, knuckles balancing on the edge of the crate; it puts him just above Kaz's eye level but well within his view. He's snub-nosed, freckled, tanned—can't have been in Ketterdam for long. "I didn't think you'd actually come," he says. "Figured you'd send someone."

Kaz spreads his hands. "Congratulations. You've made yourself enough of a nuisance to gain my notice. Most people wouldn't call that a good thing."

Felix's lips twist bitterly. "You really think you're the toughest thing walking these streets, don't you, Brekker? Like you're invincible because you're rich and not afraid to bash in a man's skull? You wouldn't have come if I were just a nuisance. I worry you."

“I had the fear beat out of me before I was your age,” Kaz replies. He was this boy far too recently to be talking that way, but it’s the truth. “All that’s left is sense and spite.”

“Like you’d know spite.” Pieterse leaps down from the crates and lands right in front of Kaz. He’s close enough that Kaz feels the rush of wind from it, the brush of the kid’s breath. The water laps at his feet, hungry to consume him, patient with its vengeance; since that night on the roof, the memories have been prone to rise at the slightest provocation, consuming any time he lets his mind rest. He hasn’t been sleeping much.

Despite the thundering of his pulse and the sickness that coils in him, he refuses to step back.

“There’s no justice here,” Felix spits. “You can’t deserve a cent of what you have.”

“I worked for it all,” Kaz replies, his voice low and harsh. Whatever this is about, he’s ready to be done with the chatting and face it. He learned long ago that he is willing to hurt anyone and everyone to make sure that he is never hurt again. “I fought for it. I killed for it. If you’re in the way, you can join the list. But you didn’t come here to tell me what I’ve heard before.”

“You don’t know?” Pieterse tips his head, mockingly wide-eyed. “But I thought Dirtyhands knew *everything.* Maybe they were right in saying you’d gone soft.”

Kaz knows well enough to tell when he’s being baited. If the things people say are really a matter of concern, they’re certainly not an immediate one. “Every story changes with the teller,” Kaz says smoothly. “And you aren’t hiding the fact that you’re aching to tell, so allow me to indulge you.”

“Like hell you will,” Felix mutters. He leans back on the crate. “It’s a shame really. We’ve met, you know.”

Kaz regards him in silence. He’s got a pistol in his pocket and he’s not about to waste his time. He’s going to get rid of this problem one way or another.

“I guess you don’t even remember *that* ,” says Felix, rolling his neck and smirking cruelly. The smirk vanishes as he stands up straighter and takes a step across the space between them. “That’s what I mean by justice. It’s not so hard. If you’d just *think* about it with that monstrous brain of yours—”

He reaches out, perhaps to grab Kaz by the lapel. Kaz doesn’t care to find out; before the boy’s fingers brush his coat, he’s spun his cane in his hand and cracked Pieterse across the jaw. He grunts and falls back against the crates with Kaz standing over him.

“Stop wasting my time,” Kaz snaps. His heart is still racing. “The theatrics aren’t helping you unless you’re trying to get shot.”

“Fine,” Felix spits, blood spraying behind the words. “I’ll feed it to you and we’ll see if you remember. No reason, no permission, and no shame, huh, Dirtyhands?”

“Shame is bad for business,” Kaz replies, smoothing his lapel. As his gloved hand passes over his heart, he feels its thrumming. “I don’t have time for it.”

“Make time,” says Felix. He’s on his knees, but managing to kneel with defiance. “We just came here, me and my da. Weren’t even supposed to stay. We wanted to buy a farm.”

“Touching,” says Kaz.

Felix slams his fist against the crate. “You wanted me to talk, let me talk. You don’t get to take that from me too.”

Kaz gestures grandly for the boy to continue. It’s like prodding a bull, but riling people up tends to make them reckless, and that’s where Kaz can exploit their mistakes.

Felix’s chest rises and falls with the exertion of fury alone. “We were going to sell my father’s ring. Pure gold. Emeralds around the band. Remember that?”

Distantly. He sold it for some obscene amount more than it was worth. But he doesn’t say any of that to Pieterse; he just keeps glaring, lets his conscience slip away from him, lets the beast he is show its manic gleam in his eyes. This is bigger than an heirloom, and his mind refuses to trace it further. Why would his greatest weapon *now* betray him?

“When he lost it, when *you* stole it, Da went to the tables,” says Felix, his face twisting as he speaks. His voice is low and controlled, but saturated with rage. Some furious thing inside of this boy aches to be set loose. Kaz can relate, but he’s careful not to sympathize. “To your club. He was desperate, thought maybe he could make the money back. Instead,” he says, his voice rising as he pushes to his feet, “he got killed by his creditors.”

“Then your father was just another pigeon looking for quick coin,” Kaz says sharply. “Go to war with his ghost, not with my gang.”

Felix stares, almost shaking with fury. “Easy for you to say. Do you even remember his name?”

The words die on Kaz’s tongue. He keeps up a cold exterior, silent, but suddenly his thoughts are raging.

Speak my brother’s name.

Just another pigeon looking for quick coin.

Remember that? See, it’s easy.

Does he? Does it take memory to see what he’s turned into?

He has always been a monster and always been a boy. The first thing he ever did was kill. He’d known to beat up someone weaker and take what they had without having to learn. He wants to take Inej and Jordan and show them the apple trees. He is a sick shell of that child who will hurt anyone before they can hurt him.

He is something much worse. He is a Barrel boss who stripped a child of his family for a price.

There's the answer to your identity crisis, Jordie whispers cruelly, a voice he hasn't heard in —not long enough. *Do you like it?*

"Why the gloves, anyway?" Felix says abruptly. "You and I both know you don't have claws."

"Don't I?" says Kaz, deadly quiet, not quite facing him.

"No." Felix shakes his head, takes a slow step forward. "You're just a man…"

He reaches for Kaz's glove.

There's a panicked second between his hand brushing Kaz's wrist and Kaz shoving him against the crate with a pistol to his temple where it almost unravels. Or maybe it has already.

Kaz steps back, the gun still extended, his heart jackrabbiting against his ribs. "The Dregs could use you," he says, a smile in his voice but none on his face—and it's a smile that shows teeth.

"They do say to keep your enemies close, don't they?" says Felix. "But you're only human. A crooked crown will fall the same as any other."

Kaz Brekker, philosopher crook. He wills Rollins' voice out of his head. "Find a gang that needs you. Make people know that you built it up. Take every job until you can afford not to."

"Thanks," Felix says acidically, "but if I do things your way, you'll see me coming. I'll leave you time to forget me between now and when I destroy you, since your memory is so short."

"I doubt I will. Stay off our territory." Kaz turns his back—which is less of a surrender and more of a challenge. He'll walk away.

"What did you do with the ring, anyway?" says Felix from behind him, a bit too casually. "Give it to that little girl of yours?"

Kaz doesn't ask how he knows. Felix Pieterse is just as angry and just as dangerous as he was, but a measure more reckless. He can't sense that he has pushed too far. Where Kaz might only bluff that he'd buried Rollins' child, someone with less subtlety might go through with it.

Kaz turns halfway around. He doesn't quite look. He just fires.

Chapter End Notes

Meme for this chapter: “You have become the very thing you swore to destroy.”
Oooh, sometimes grey morality isn’t sexy, it’s just uncomfortable, now isn’t it?

Inej/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Inej teaches Jordan to climb. Kaz teaches Jordan a secret.

Chapter Notes

I haven't done a double POV chapter in a while, so I figured it was high time. It's also time for some shout-outs~

alltheworldisinmyhead, I appreciate the Heathers reference and I am glad to report that I'm still as motivated as ever!

Andhehe, I assure you that I also get super excited when I see your somment notifications.

andyoudoctor, to be thought provoking was certainly the goal, so I'm glad I achieved it :D

khaki83101, tysm!!

itsyagirlkath, you asked for dad!Kaz content and I have delivered ;)

wicked333, nothing to put your actions in perspective like your own past, huh?

LeoLou, there's that Slytherin loyalty that he has.

whynotcherries, I know that I have screamed at length about this comment, but honestly I never plan to stop. Your thoughts are FASCINATING and just made the whole thing so much better <3

Blue_daisies, it is my life's work to hurt my readers, and I plan to do it for as long as possible ;)

WitheryDithery, let's just pretend that I'm smart enough to have done the emerald thing on purpose, huh? XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej has trusted Kaz with her life. She should be able to trust him with her child. *Their* child, if Jordan has anything to say about it.

Jordan has been clinging to her back most of the way to Kaz's window, but the last jump is short enough and the roofs dry enough that Inej lets her climb down and try it.

"Keep your eyes where you want to land," she says, pointing to the spot on the Slat's roof that they're aiming for. "And remember that it's better to land too far than too close."

I sound like my mother, she reflects. *Practical advice that's actually a metaphor.*

Jordan is as oblivious as a younger Inej might have been, however; she crouches like a little frog and springs off to land on the shingles opposite. Inej is unreasonably proud of how quiet her landing is and finds herself smiling as she follows.

Jordan pushes experimentally on the window.

"He never locks it," Inej says with a sigh. "Although once he starts teaching you to pick locks, he might."

She pulls at the stubborn frame and slides the window open, slipping inside from the gray sky. Kaz must have gotten her note; he comes in just as they're arriving, clearly after a labored climb up the stairs.

"Why didn't you keep the downstairs office?" Inej asks, swinging her legs over the sill while Jordan hops down into the room.

"It doesn't have a window," Kaz replies. There's a smile in his eyes that doesn't quite make it to his face, but it's subdued somehow. She hasn't seen much of him since he told her the story that still weighs on the back of her mind, and when she has, he's been…different. Distant, but no longer confident in his distance. Uncertain. Unmoored. It would make sense. She doubts he's ever told anyone before.

"Da!" Jordan says, waving happily, but to Inej's surprise, Kaz's expression darkens at the sight of her.

"I don't know if you should leave," he says, pulling out his desk chair and sinking into it, stretching his bad leg out.

"It's just a supply run," says Inej with a slight frown. She tries to quiet the frustration rising in her, but for once, she wants to be able to trust him. She wants to believe that if he says he'll stay, that he'll do better for Jordan, then she can come back the next day and hold him to it.

"It's not that," says Kaz, picking up a pen in his gloved hand and twirling it between his fingers. He stops, carefully sets the pen down on his desk, and meets Inej's eyes for the first time. His gaze is black and burning, and her breath stutters. "Someone found out about her."

Now Inej is forgetting to breathe for a very different reason. "Who?" If she'd known, she never would have sent a note—that was too easily tracked—she would have to change all of her plans…

“Felix Pieterse,” Kaz says, ever so quietly, his rasp a grating burr. His gaze has fallen to the floor now. There is something in his expression beyond Inej’s understanding, and there are so few looks she’s never seen on him before that she can’t name it. Is it remorse? Suddenly, without knowing why, she’s afraid.

“How did he—”

“I don’t know.” His voice is still that dangerous quiet. “But he’s dead.”

Inej reflexively looks at Jordan, but she has pulled the watch from her coat pocket and is sitting on the floor, holding it up to her ear and bobbing her head in time with the ticking sounds. She slips down off of the window sill and walks up to him, standing where she can still see Jordan. She lowers her voice. “You killed him.”

Kaz’s gaze rises to hers, unapologetic and unforgiving. Somehow still defeated.

She doesn’t look away, as much as she wants to. “He was a child, Kaz.”

“He was me. And he knew about Jordan.”

Inej takes a step back. She isn’t sure that she agrees, but she understands. They have spent too long doing what has to be done, making their own kind of justice. Kaz knows his nature; she has to believe in that. And she knows what to do now. “If you will kill to protect her,” she says, “I trust that I can leave her with you.”

Kaz looks down at Jordan, tracking her with a new gentleness in his eyes. Once again, Inej feels a desperation to pull apart the clockworks of his mind, to understand what lies beneath his machinations.

She steps away, back to the window, leaving a small bag of Jordan’s things by the desk. “Jesper and Wylan will be back from the conference tomorrow.”

He watches her go. He doesn’t say a word.

<><><>

Sleep has always been an inconvenience to Kaz. In the Barrel, being asleep meant being vulnerable, and besides, the city itself never slept, so what might pass him by if he allowed himself to? He had a business to run, vengeance to craft, a kingdom to build, and far too many pigeons ripe for the plucking to miss. Even back on the farm with Jordie—in his other life that has begun to feel much more like part of this one—he’d never wanted to go to bed, afraid of what he might miss or the time he’d be wasting.

Lately, he avoids it in hope of missing something, of seeing Jordie every time he closes his eyes. But it could only go on for so long.

Normally he doesn’t recognize them, the white faces in the black water. This time, it’s not just Jordie—it’s Jordan, it’s Inej, it’s Felix Pieterse, blood running down his side. Their hands reach for him, they give in his grip, they stare blankly. He can’t get away. He can’t breathe. His lungs are filling with salt and rot.

The fever burns in the chill of the harbor. There are more of them every second, burying him, obscuring the sky. He twists and writhes in desperation until suddenly there's a ceiling over him instead of storm clouds and gray-eyed faces. He's shaking so badly that there is a distant rattling in his ears. He hasn't realized that he's sitting up until he's staring at his lap, staring like the faces imprinted onto his memory.

Before he knows what he's doing or why, he's grasped his gloves with shaking hands and pulled them on, fighting to breathe right again. He looks at Jordan, who built a little nest for herself under the desk. He doesn't have much in the way of spare pillows and such, but she seemed happy to take one and burrow into his coat.

He blinks hard and swallows down the sickness in his throat, the image of her swollen face and rotting eyes. She's all right. She's here and they're both all right.

Well, not entirely.

As his eyes adjust to the dark, he realizes that she's crying, soft whimpers reaching his ears over the shuddering of his own breath. He shoves a hand through his hair, rocking on the edge of the bed, trying to force himself to get up and go to her. What good is the half-spoken acceptance that he is her father if he can't force his way through this?

Ignore the pain. Ignore the lies you know. Face it later. Do what has to be done.

The contradiction aches. To help her, he has to do the very thing that's gotten him here, the very strategy he's been fighting to unlearn.

Jordan squirms and her little eyes snap open, bright in the dim shadows, and she immediately starts to cry in earnest. "Da?"

The name strikes him like a bullet to the chest. He shoves himself up off the bed and doesn't bother to go for his cane, instead taking the few steps to the desk and levering himself down on his stronger side.

She puts her arms out, reaching for him. "Da!"

His breath catches. He shakes his head. What can he say? Can he say anything at all? He knows he can't stand to touch her, not now. He can't hold her, can't even sit close to her. What does it make him if he can't even force himself to speak?

Jordan looks on the edge of a fresh wave of tears. "There were bad men," she whines.

Kaz forces himself to inhale deeply. "I'll protect you," he says, though the way he sounds he isn't sure she should believe it. He doesn't quite look at her. He's afraid of what his broken mind will make him see.

"I want a hug," Jordan sniffles.

Kaz's gloved hands curl in his lap. He could try. But it would be so much worse for the both of them if it went wrong, and he's barely holding himself together as it is. But she needs him.

Inej trusted him with Jordan. He refuses to fail that.

“I can’t,” he says, his voice coming out hoarse and horrible. He pushes his hair back off of his face again and looks at her.

All he sees is her face in the dark, small and round and streaked with tears. She hiccups and rubs her eyes.

mati en sheva yelu. This action will have no echo. He wishes he had the strength to promise her that. But all he has to give is what he should have said to far too many people years ago.

“I’m sorry.” He says it so quietly that he doesn’t even hear himself. *Say you’re sorry.* Inej would know what to do if she were here. But he’s spent enough time fighting alone that he can face this, too. And if he can manage it, beyond every fight, every heist, every challenge, it might be the bravest thing he’s ever done.

“You know why Inej makes you ask,” he says slowly, “before you hug me. Sometimes it’s…”

This is all wrong. This isn’t like him. But it feels absurdly safe, suspended, nowhere to fall. “Like that dream you had.”

“Scary,” Jordan says, nodding slowly. “Hugs are nice. Hugs aren’t scary.”

“Sometimes they are,” says Kaz, pressing one gloved hand hard to his knee.

Jordan is quiet for a moment, apparently thinking about this revelation. “ *You’re* not scared of anything.”

“That’s what we tell people,” says Kaz, and he finds that he can breathe again. “This is our secret.”

Jordan puts her small hand out. His heart starts racing again, but all she does is touch her thumb to the little finger of his upturned hand. “Not scary?” she asks.

Kaz shifts his shoulders back and lets himself breathe. “Not at all.” His eyes trail her small, nimble hands. With some training, she could fit those into locks and pockets better than even he could. “We don’t have to go back to sleep just yet. How’d you like to learn to pick locks?”

Jordan gives him a smile too big for her face, and the water begins to recede.

Chapter End Notes

I relate to Kaz. Not being able to hug you all across the Internet is the worst.

the graveyard of darlings #1: tag, you're it

Chapter Summary

> This is a scene that got cut when I edited my outline, but I really liked it, so despite its not being "canon", I figured you all might as well. See you on Saturday!

Chapter Notes

> technically 38.5, titled "the graveyard of darlings" because "kill your darlings"—anyway.

“Tag, you’re it,” says Nina. It has been three hours since Inej left, and Kaz is fairly sure that Jordan hasn’t gone one minute without crying or sulking. He’d thought it couldn’t get worse than the crying, and then she started to pout.

Jesper has sometime since fled the upstairs sitting room where they’ve sequestered themselves. Lucky him. Kaz is going to find Jesper and make *him* cry.

“That is cruel and unusual by *my* standards, Nina dear,” says Kaz, who is being offered a wailing Jordan. He could be at the Crow Club right now. He probably would have been if he were smarter.

“Indeed, how dare I make you take care of your own child,” she says sarcastically. “I have already made my noble sacrifice. Inej should marry me when she gets back.”

It might be easier for her, Kaz thinks. However, he halts his internal argument re: the Dregs wondering where exactly he’s been, and shrugs off his coat.

“I gave her a perfectly good one,” Nina protests. Now they’re both pouting. Maybe Kaz *will* leave, see how they like it.

“That didn’t work, now, did it?” he says, and drapes the heavy wool coat over Jordan where she’s sitting on an olive velvet armchair. All goes blissfully silent, and she peers out at them from beneath the collar.

“Saints’ sake,” Nina mutters irritably. “I hate you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Kaz says drily, taking the seat beside Jordan.

Nina remains standing, regarding both of them with her hands on her hips. “Maybe if we get lucky she’ll fall asleep.”

“I don’t *wanna* sleep,” Jordan says stubbornly from somewhere within Kaz’s coat. Her voice starts to wobble. “I want Mama.”

Kaz’s glare exists on several levels. The one he pins Nina with now could make a grown man cry.

Unfortunately, this is Nina Zenik, so she just glares back.

Jordan/Felix

Chapter Summary

Jordan learns to pick locks and goes shopping. Felix wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Downside of posting that little vignette is that the chapter numbers are all messed up now, but oh well. Time for some shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, the goal is to be both the source of the comfort and the reason it's needed.

andyoudoctor, so many things to say, but especially that I'm just SO PROUD of the three of them.

wicked333, it was going to happen soon enough.

itsyagirlkath, this family deserves the world <3

flylikeajailbird, good to know I've done my job ;)

Andhehe, the most important thing to me is that Kaz is learning to actually say what he means <3

khaki83101, a very understandable request.

Carolina, this isn't necessarily related to the content of the comment, but it's just so cool that people from all over the world are enjoying this thing I made.

LeoLou, I really wanted to get into the good things that have made her who she is, as well as the bad <3

SpaceAce1123, that's one of my fav headcanons now <3

alltheworldisinmyhead, the fact that he's even trying means SO MUCH.

1islessthan3books, you are incredible for filling my inbox with kindness, so thank you!!

KiwisAndTea, bonus points to you for reading the whole thing in one day??? And commenting on EVERY CHAPTER?? You made my heart so insanely happy <333

Jordan is *not* sleepy. Her da keeps making fun of her for yawning, but he's just mean, and he's the one who let her stay up super late anyways. He gave her some locks and some little poky metal things that she'd waved around, watching them catch the light, until he told her to stop before she put someone's eye out. Then he laughed. She still doesn't know why that was funny.

He says she's doing a really good job, too—she just has to fiddle around with the poky things until the lock clicks open, and then he almost *smiles.* That's nearly as good as a hug, since her da is very grumpy.

But she knows new things about him now. She knows that there are things that scare him after all. She knows what his laugh sounds like. She knows that he likes candy because he took some of hers. She knows that even when you're grown up and scary, you still get bad dreams sometimes.

She went to sleep for a little bit after that and didn't dream any more. Now they're walking in a *tunnel,* and Jordan doesn't even have to run to keep up because his stick makes him walk nice and slow. She's wearing her new coat with what's left of her candy in one pocket and her watch and knife in the other one. Her da has her climbing shoes so that they don't get messed up walking on the stone.

When they come out of the other end of the tunnel into a foggy day, it's only a little bit more of a walk to get to Jesper and Wylan's house. Mama says she used to call them silly names, Tall Man and Red Boy or something like that. Jordan is older now. She knows people's names. She knows Kaz and Inej, but she likes Da and Mama better.

They don't go in the front door. Instead, her da takes them around the side to a smaller door with a round knob and a little roof over it. Jordan tries to twist the knob, but it doesn't turn.

Her da holds his hand out and slides one of the shiny needles from his black-gloved palm into her grasp. She puts it in the lock and moves it around like he told her to until she feels it slide into the right channel and then the gears click. Beaming, she looks up at her da.

He motions to the door. "Try it again."

Jordan tries the handle, and this time it opens! She gives an excited little squeal.

"Now, *that* ," says her da, "is going to get you caught. A bit more training and you'll be able to crack something like that in about two seconds."

"Sorry," says Jordan in a small voice, but she can't stop from giggling, just a little.

Jesper is sitting on the couch when they go in, wearing a bright yellow shirt. Jordan loves his clothes. Her da does not.

Jesper picks up his head and looks over his shoulder at them, not even bothering to get up. "Really?" he says. "I'm almost positive we gave you a key."

“And I’m almost positive I told you to replace those locks with something a five-year-old couldn’t get through,” says her da, tapping his stick against the floor.

Jordan waves with the hand that’s still holding the shiny needle.

Jesper stares at them both. “You didn’t.” When there’s no answer, he keeps talking. “You *did.* ”

“Yes, and I need you to make me another set of lockpicks. And fix the one she bent.” He crosses the room to Jesper, his stick clacking against the floor as he goes, and Jordan trails behind.

“Good to see you too,” says Jesper, but he takes the thing that her da hands to him. He sees Jordan and kneels down so that he goes from being as tall as a tree to about her height. “So you get to hang out with me and Wylan for a bit, huh?”

Jordan nods enthusiastically. “I wanna see more magic.”

Jesper shakes his head, grinning. “Kaz does magic. I do science.”

Jordan shrugs. “Up,” she demands, putting her arms out to him. He’s really tall, and when he stands up she’ll be up super high.

“But of course, your highness,” says Jesper, and puts her all the way up on his shoulders. “But you know that you have to stop growing or you’ll be too big for this.”

“Or get as tall as you,” says Jordan. She’s taller than her da now! She waves down at him happily, but he’s not looking at her—he’s staring hard at the top of his stick with a face that’s sort of sad-mad. Jordan doesn’t understand what it is or why, but she knows it’s not a happy face. She wants her da to be happy again. She makes a silly face, but he doesn’t look at her.

Jesper pats her leg. “Well, it’s lucky for everyone that Wylan and I are here just in time to save you from getting *too* corrupted.”

“Depends on your definition of corrupted,” her da mutters, still looking at the floor. “Your fashion sense is a greater crime than anything I’ve done.”

“Now *that* ,” says Jesper in a voice that makes Jordan giggle, “is a low blow.”

“It’s also the truth,” her da replies, tapping his stick against the ground and starting to leave. Jordan is about to squirm to get down so that she can go after him and make him stay, but she can’t latch onto him or grab his leg or anything unless she wants him to be scared again. It’s all so *confusing.* She just wants him to be happy and not grumpy or scared, but sometimes hugs are okay and sometimes they’re scary, and sometimes it’s only okay for him to hug *her,* and Mama isn’t here to tell her what’s okay since she always just seems to know, and suddenly Jordan feels like crying. She’s a big girl now and she shouldn’t cry, but her throat and eyes hurt like she’s just a baby again.

“Hey, hey—” Jesper takes her down off of his shoulders and sits on the couch with her. “What’s wrong? You don’t want him to leave?” His hands are going all over the place, on the

buttons of his shirt and over his short, curly hair and to his belt like he's going to grab onto something but he doesn't.

Jordan just shakes her head, her lip wobbling. She isn't just sad because he's leaving, but all the other reasons she's sad are too big for the words that she knows. She knows he's coming back. She knows Inej is coming back. They said they would. But for some reason, she's really, *really* scared that they won't.

"Well," says Jesper, giving her a squeeze with one arm, "he just didn't want to stick around for what I have planned, because your da is no fun."

"Locks are fun," says Jordan, scrubbing at her eyes. She wants to know what he's talking about, though.

"Oh, my," says Jesper in the same silly voice as before, "things are more serious than I thought if you think that locks are *fun.* Well, desperate times call for Jesper-ate measures."

He laughs more than Jordan does, but he's very silly, so she at least manages to smile.

"Oh, come on," he says with a big grin, "that was funny. Anyway, we're going to fix this. You know how?"

Jordan sniffles. "How?"

Jesper swings her up high into the air and plops her down on the floor. She almost feels like she could laugh instead of crying, which is better, because she's a big girl and her mama and her da *are* coming back. "We," he says, "are going shopping."

<><><>

Jordan has never been to this place before. Most of the things she knows about the city are the roofs, and the places where she and Mama have met Kaz when they come back from the boat, and Jesper and Wylan's big house. This is a new place with nice stores and pretty ladies walking around. Jordan wants one of those dresses.

Jesper is holding one of her hands and Wylan is holding the other one, and they tell her to run and jump and then they swing her high in the air like she's flying. Jordan squeals and makes them do it again. She is still wearing her new coat, the red one with the fur, and she thinks that it makes her fit in with all of the fancy people.

"Where do you want to go first?" says Wylan. He's a little easier to walk next to than Jesper, who goes too fast, but not as easy as her da.

"Um…" Jordan looks around at all the stores. Some of them have pictures outside of what they have, but a lot of them just have signs. Jordan is learning her letters, but she's not very good at putting them all together.

One of the stores has a picture of a big lollipop on the outside. Jordan pulls them over to it and looks up at the poster. "S…T…R? Stra…" She frowns. That word is too long. Also, Wylan is holding her hand really tight all of a sudden.

“Strawberry cream,” says Jesper, “but if you want to know a secret, reading isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Just get someone to read to you.”

“ *Jesper.* Don’t tell her that,” says Wylan, but he doesn’t sound mad, he sounds happy. Grown-ups are weird. Jordan doesn’t think she ever wants to be one, except that there are lots of things grown-ups can do that she wants to do.

Anyway, she wants to try the strawberry creams, whatever those are. They sound yummy. So she pulls Jesper and Wylan into the store after her. They have to let go and get in a line to go through the door, but Jordan is already running ahead anyway. She’s gonna eat so much candy—maybe that’s a good part of not having Mama here. *She* would probably say no.

Jesper pulls out a couple of coins and clicks them together. “All right, pick something out,” he says. “And don’t tell Kaz that you actually *paid* for something. He’ll be very disappointed.”

“Jesper.”

“What?”

<><><>

Elsewhere in the city, a boy wakes up in a dim room, with calloused hands dripping water into his mouth. There is an aching throb burrowed into his side, and judging by the sweat and tingling heat of his skin he has or has had an infection, but he’s more alive than he expected to be.

He remembers, vaguely, those same calloused hands finding him shot and bleeding in an alley; he remembers them touching him, being gentle with him, carrying him into the darkness and through the fire. Now he knows that he has been fevered, for he’s only ashes of what he was before. Maybe it was infection or maybe just his rage consuming him as he slept, but he has been burned down to the hard and blackened core of who he has to be to do what must be done.

He sits up achingly slowly, a hand pressed to the wound in his side where a bullet has sometime since been removed.

“You got lucky,” says the voice of his rescuer. It is an old and creaking voice. “They missed.”

He won’t be a nuisance that Dirtyhands is so easily rid of. Unarmed, he shook the man enough to make him miss. He is already imagining what he could do with an army.

Kaz Brekker has too many enemies for his own good. Kaz Brekker has a weakness that one person alive knows. Kaz Brekker has a child. Like everyone else, even Dirtyhands fell victim to caring.

Felix Pieterse isn’t going to waste his time like that.

His rescuer’s hands are not only calloused, they are lined. The voice is thin with age. She goes down without a cry; Felix empties her pockets, searches the rest of the room for what

little is there, and takes some bandages with him. He takes a few proper steps and a hot blade of pain stabs his side, but he presses on. He doesn't have any more time for pain than he has for kindness.

Dirtyhands taught him that. Felix isn't doing things his way.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz gives Inej a parting gift.

Chapter Notes

I don't think y'all understand how excited I am for this one, so let's just get straight into the chapter and some shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, so many good things in this comment, but in particular I'm glad that you pointed out the mentions of Wylan's dyslexia—I wanted to get into that just a little bit from the perspective of someone who wouldn't think twice about it.

khaki83101, she has a lot of very big feelings for a very little person.

itsyagirlkath, I will happily continue to make you all question whether or not you like him. The whole point of his character is to be a moral dilemma, for Kaz as well as for us.

wicked333, she's following in the family business after all ;)

LeoLou, I promised a milestone for the real chapter 40 and I'm pretty sure this delivers...

Carolina, I do love writing her POVs, they're precious.

Andhehe, Jesper is best uncle, really.

whynotcherries, thank you so much for ALL OF THIS, especially pointing out the lines that you liked (no surprise they're my favorites too XD)

grishaverse4ever, thank you!! I wanted more of Jordan with her crow family, so being the author and getting to make my own (questionable) decisions, I did that thing. Glad you liked it XD

KiwisAndTea, you should know by now that I like to switch up the fluff and angst, keep 'em guessing.

happysad, I'm going to scream about this comment for a while, but the update is here at any rate and I really hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She's been back for two days. If you don't come to meet the Wraith, she will find you.

Her heart had taken her back out to sea—beyond the new leads, beyond the need for supplies and messages at port towns, Inej's blood had begun to itch at the domestic life Ketterdam had for her. She wasn't going to be Kaz's assassin or his spy, and while she stayed for Jordan's party, she is a wanderer in spirit. The Suli travel. It is born into her bones.

Besides, Inej knows pretty cages far too well. She was far more inclined to leave at the first sense of being trapped.

She and Jordan will leave again soon, probably for the longest time yet if her information is anything to go by. She knows that Kaz knows. Maybe it's why she hasn't seen him.

She is a scout, and she is a spy, and she is a hunter. And Kaz is not hiding from her.

She won't find him at the Slat; he is expecting her. He wants to be found, but he wants to give her trouble by it. These are the things that Inej no longer wonders how she knows, because it's Kaz, and that is just a part of who they are.

Below her, the briny wind off the harbor carries fog and damp through the tangle of streets and canals, scents of smoke and fish reaching from the mansions of the Geldstraat to the slums of the Barrel. The streetlamps wink in the dark as she passes by, a shadow crossing and then gone. Inej wonders if it will be changed when she returns.

She is meeting Kaz as the captain behind the cloak of the Wraith: dressed in black against the smoky night, hooded and masked, but goldened and wind-roughened and wiry-limbed beneath it all. He can have his choice of which he prefers.

Inej takes her time. If he can make a game for her, she can make him wait. It's these small and savage pleasures that delight them both, like when they were seventeen and as reckless as they were dangerous and would bicker to forget the fact that they might not see another year alive.

She walks along the gables of a roof like it's a tightrope, turning a cartwheel before the yellow moon to remind herself that she knows the rhythm. *Sankt Petyr. Sankta Lizabeta. Sankta Alina.* The feeling blooms in her again of a precipice, a dare to leap, a change in the wind pushing her over the edge. She welcomes it into her silence and will listen to what it has to say. It is in time with the beating of her heart, steady, eager.

Her heart and her body, things she knows are hers at last, guide her over the spires and the ridges of Ketterdam, from the flat-topped warehouses to the sloping docks, until she finds him.

She pulls down her mask. Of course. She hadn't even realized where she was going.

The quay. No, the harbor. The canals vanish behind her as she slips down the facade of a building and pads down the docks, following the tide that pulls her inevitably to where he stands against the line between dark sea and darker sky.

She steps up beside him. They don't speak. Somewhere, a seagull cries; Inej finds herself wishing it were a crow.

Kaz's hand flicks up into her vision. Between two bare fingers he grasps a single earring, a teardrop pearl.

"Don't tell me you left some woman walking around with one earring," Inej murmurs, looking out over the moon-goldened water. In spite of herself, she smiles slightly, though for all she knows Kaz can't see it beneath the shadows of her hood.

"No," he muses, his rock salt rasp rolling over her. Inej fights the urge to close her eyes against the surge of feeling, the catch of her breath. "Your crows brought it to me."

"Seems like they're your crows as well," she says. Her voice is so soft tonight, a silken whisper; the feeling of something coming, of being pulled onward to some glorious fall, is so powerful that she can barely find words in its roaring force. "Call them ours. We're sharing a lot of things these days."

"Not this," says Kaz from somewhere in her periphery. His knuckles brush against hers, and then his brilliant trickster hand is tucked into her palm, pressing the cold earring against her fingers but not pulling away. "This is yours."

Inej turns and looks at him for the first time. It is a blessing and a mistake. He is tragically beautiful, not in the way of something made beautiful by tragedy, but in the way of something that brings pain in its beauty. Something she should not find beautiful. Sharp lines to cut herself on, black eyes to lose herself in, soft lips and soft hands that would make her lose her mind. She wants to call it all forbidden, distant, but it is close. It's worse somehow, that he is so Saints-forsaken *close.*

"Walk with me," she says, and her voice has returned.

Kaz takes up his cane, and…and they walk. Their hands swing between them, joined. They keep pace. It's not hard after years of fighting side by side—and she could argue that they are fighting now, every second that they touch. The tap of his cane and his footsteps and the distant gulls are all too quiet. Inej, of course, walks silently. It is all that she knows.

They make it all the way to the end of the dock, and Inej leans against the railing, the wind off the harbor rippling her hood and the few loose hairs that dance around her face. The water is smeared with moonlight. Kaz's hand is still warm in hers. She can't think of a single thing to say.

She wonders why he chose to meet her here, yet all the same she knows. She knows now, now that he has finally done what he was too battered and jaded to do at a furious, broken seventeen. She knows all that this harbor has taken from him, and the defiance that he stands in to touch her, skin to skin, right above those waters. The nameless feeling rises in her throat, compels her aimlessly, terrifies her with its magnitude. She doesn't want it to be what it is.

“How long this time?” Kaz asks. His voice isn’t nearly as rough against the background of whispering waves.

Inej closes her eyes. “Years, Kaz. I don’t know how many.”

He gives what might be a steadying breath or a sigh. His thumb caresses the side of her hand, terribly gently.

“Feed the crows for me,” she says, her voice so quiet now that she almost doesn’t hear it.

His fingers flex around hers. “I will.”

“And don’t stop—trying. Visit Jes and Wylan. Just don’t—” How can she say that she doesn’t want to lose him, to lose this? How can she ask for more than everything he’s already given her? Are there words for any of this?

But he says, “I won’t.” And that’s all.

They stand in the sounds of birds and murmuring water. Inej looks at him from beneath her hood. “I’ll get you a new hat.”

Kaz meets her eyes properly for what might be the first time since she’s arrived. “My darling Inej, the treasure of my heart, nothing would make me happier.”

Inej nudges their joined hands, suddenly shy for reasons beyond her understanding. “That’s a lie.”

“And that’s true,” he says, bracing his free hand against the railing. They mirror each other, and their wavering reflections in the harbor multiply the illusion. “You can have the earring, you know.”

Inej turns her face fully to him, her hood slipping back from her hairline, though it doesn’t fall all the way. “Will you…put it in?”

“I might stab you,” he says with a faint echo of a smile. Still, he releases her hand; it feels cold, suddenly.

As he faces her, Inej almost laughs. “That’s *my* area of expertise.” She turns so that her back is against the railing and the side of her face is to Kaz.

He is so close now—there is barely space between them for the wind off the harbor to pass through. He smells like ink and coffee, same as he always has. He bends close and his breath brushes her cheek; Inej’s chest constricts, her eyelids flutter—powerful wanting and revulsion surge in tandem. The scent of the salt breeze is stronger than incense, she insists to herself. She is not strangled in silk. She is standing on the quay with a boy who’s as terrified as she is.

And his hands are gentle. The irony is almost painful and yet she wants to laugh. Dirtyhands is more careful with her than any man has ever been, his touches faint and cautious. The earring’s hook clicks shut, but he doesn’t move back; his hand remains beneath her hood.

Inej shifts her gaze to meet his eyes. They are wide and wary and soft, his pupils dilated, something in them speaking of terrible hope. “Can I…” His voice comes out dry and hoarse. “Can I try something?”

Inej feels frozen. She can’t nod. She can’t speak.

“I won’t unless you say so,” says Kaz, beginning to withdraw his hand.

Irony upon irony. Kaz Brekker didn’t need a reason, never mind permission, yet with her he always asks. “No,” she says, finding her voice. “I mean—yes. Don’t stop.” It’s all she can manage, but she wills him to hear what she really means. *I trust you.*

Kaz’s hand slips back beneath her hood. His thumb catches the fold of her mask and pulls it back up over her mouth and nose. His gaze never leaves hers.

Inej nods, barely. *Go on. Finish the story.* Her heart speaks where she cannot.

The distance between them is so bare. He barely has to lean in to put his lips to the fabric, over hers, safe and sane. Inej’s eyes flutter shut. She wants to break this moment into pieces and know each one at a time—the brush of his lashes on her cheeks, the wind going still, the distant gulls, the ink-and-coffee scent of him—but it’s all there and then gone. A halfway kiss, wholly perfect.

Kaz steps back. Inej touches the earring, looking at him. It’s smooth and cold under her fingertips. “A pearl?” she asks, with a smile that perhaps he can’t see. “Don’t they stand for innocence and purity?”

He’s smiling, a tiny thing but full and glorious, his fingertips drumming on the head of his cane. He’s always so still and composed, and yet this reminds her of Jesper, of how he can’t hold still when he’s excited. “A pearl,” says Kaz, “is an annoyance that gets into an oyster’s shell and bothers him so much that he makes something valuable in spite of himself.”

“You and your way with words,” Inej says drily, grinning anyway. “I’m back to being valuable now, it seems.”

“More than you know,” Kaz replies. He straightens his coat over his shoulders and tightens his tie, suddenly looking aimless.

That’s all right. They’ve said more than enough. And they’ll write. She was a fool to forget about these everyday miracles. She could stay, she supposes, or they could walk back together, but while she’s spoken all that she can, the harbor has more to say.

“I’ll be back,” she says before turning to make her way back up the docks.

Kaz’s voice comes from somewhere behind her, soft against the waves. “I’ll be here.”

Chapter End Notes

I may or may not post a little something to go along with this chapter today, so be sure to keep an eye on my Instagram for that ;)

Letters

Chapter Summary

Excerpts from the letters between Kaz Brekker and Inej Ghafa, sent by increasingly convoluted methods over a period of slightly less than four years.

Chapter Notes

I've been waiting a while to post this one, so let's get right into shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, I love to imagine your reactions—you describe them so vividly XD

khaki83101, as you're about to see, she won't be missing him entirely ;)

andyoudoctor, I've been holding on to that kiss idea for SO LONG.

alltheworldisinmyhead, come on now, you knew everything can't be fluffy and nice for too long ;)

Violetstar5, I appreciate the screaming and sincerely hope your performance went well.

itsyagirlkath, soft Kanej deserves all the rights.

wicked333, fear not, Jordan will be back in a big way soon ;)

Grishaverse4ever, thank you so much, that's so sweet!!

LeoLou, they have this lovely dynamic of giving and taking, getting close and then pulling away, but we're spiraling down within sight of somewhere to settle.

KiwisAndTea, their gentle banter owns my entire heart, honestly.

Andhehe, I'm really glad you liked that line! Callbacks to the books are my favorite.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Excerpts from the letters between Kaz Brekker and Inej Ghafa, sent by increasingly convoluted methods over a period of slightly less than four years.

To the captain of the Wraith *, hidden in the false bottom of a glass of Kaelish whiskey she's never liked, courtesy of a well-bribed bartender:*

The little spiders have been gathering names of bounty hunters. They're almost as effective as you. Don't be jealous, Wraith, after all there are four of them and one of you. ~~There could only ever be one of you.~~ The pub in which you'll find this missive is a common haunt for many of the bounty hunters mid-journey, which I suspect is also what will bring you there. Make friends, and if you can't do that, there are always the metals of persuasion—gold, silver, steel, and lead. You're kinder than I, ~~and better for it~~, so you'll probably let them choose. If you see Renier Bennik, ask him about the feathers and handcuffs and he should cooperate.

To the head of the Dregs, some months later, delivered by the normal methods because not everything has to be a twelve-part scheme, Kaz:

Renier Bennik looks like a mulberry pie when he's embarrassed. In other news, we've made an alliance with him and his crew, as well as two other bounty hunters whose ships are slower but larger and better-armed.

Also, Specht has a threat to his position as first mate. What she lacks in stature she makes up for in tenacity, and we've learned to look in the crow's nest when we can't find her. I thought you'd appreciate that. Someone painted a bullseye on the main mast and, after a near-death experience or two, she's landing knives inside the target now. Eventually, Fionn is going to teach her to shoot. I expect someone we know won't be pleased about that, though I imagine he can help her with the finer points when we return.

Whether or not she gets a promotion in the crew, I believe she would enjoy being included in your correspondence. Soon enough she'll be able to read it for herself.

To the captain of the Wraith *, written on an apparently blank piece of paper, rolled up inside the lock of a sea chest purchased for her by a mysterious donor:*

Apparently being on the Merchant Council still leaves one with enough free time to make invisible ink. ~~Not that I'm complaining~~. I'm sending the crew of the *Bleeding Sunset* your way. Their ship-naming skills might be lacking, but their combat makes up for it.

Tell your new crewmate that if she wants to hear from me, she'll have to be more creative about sending letters than you are, unless you want someone else to suffer the consequences of discovery.

Or perhaps you can dissuade her altogether by telling her of me. She has seen enough of the world that my stories won't scare her, but neither will they make me a hero in her eyes. ~~She has the hero that she needs.~~ Just as well. She should know the truth. ~~Save your sweet lies for me, Inej. I'm foolish enough to listen.~~

Wylan needs to fix this ink formula. It's smudging all over the place.

To Kaz Brekker, some months later, on the back of a shipping label arriving in Fifth Harbor:

Thank you for the ink formula. We've been in Novyi Zem, around the southern coast, so I'm sending this while we're at port for a few days. I remember you complaining about the Ravkan summer; you would never make it here. I haven't gotten sunburned so far, but Fionn is miserable, and you'd be worse. ~~I miss your complaining. I'd gladly listen if only you were here.~~

Also, it turns out that Specht can sew. It came in handy when our youngest crew member shot a hole through the sail recently. She's making bullseyes with the knives now, however.

I have a sense that something is coming, something big, something dangerous. The shadows are about their own business, my father would say. The last few ships we've come upon have been more prepared for us than usual. A few days in port are giving my crew time to recover, but the sea is a much bigger battleground than the city, and I can't so easily discover what people know or how. I can listen in taverns and port towns and interrogate the prisoners we take, but I ask now that you'd be my ears as I once was yours.

Maybe I'm being paranoid and foolish. ~~Maybe I just want to hear from you more often.~~ But better to be paranoid than ill-prepared, especially with the cargo that the *Wraith* has to protect. I won't pretend I'm not aware that my enemies know I'm coming. It's better—better for them to name their nightmares.

And in a larger, sprawling hand (corrections made by the previous author):

Hi ~~da~~. I can write my name now but ~~Inej~~ the captain says not to. I shot a gun yesterday.

To the captain and first-and-a-half mate of the Wraith, *care of Colm Fahey:*

I could have told you Specht can sew. He stitched Jesper up after a scuffle or two that went sour. Once he offered to tailor my vests, but he was drunk, so I didn't completely invert his skull. You will, of course, be moving on from Novyi Zem when you read this, although I hope you made some conversation when you retrieved this missive; I struck a very solemn deal with the aforementioned Mr. Fahey that he would hold this letter for you if it would

bring you to visit. It's too late for warnings, but nonetheless I should note that he was intent on spoiling your youngest crewmate horrendously ~~(as am I)~~.

Speaking of, advice to her from myself: she may need to adjust her stance. There have been other unsolicited suggestions from the younger and far more bothersome of the Faheys, but I advise as one lacking his natural talents, which unfortunately we must assume she is also.

But to you, I say ~~so much and so little, so much less than you deserve~~ to trust your instincts. You hardly need my input or permission to do so, ~~indeed you might be wiser without me~~, but do what you know best. The fastest way to steal a man's wallet is the same for prisons and ships. Hit where the mark isn't looking. Make sure they don't look at you.

To Kaz Brekker, rolled up around a fountain pen, received after a significant delay that he insists he wasn't worried about:

We're stopping briefly by the Wandering Isle, which is where I'm sending this from; I daresay Fionn feels much more at home here. Our youngest crewmate seems to make friends everywhere she goes. The locals all adore her, and now she wants red hair. I don't quite know how to break the news to her, but then perhaps I won't. She deserves to keep some false hope; she deserves to be allowed. ~~I wish we could have~~.

How are things on your battlefront? At first, one lead was uncovering another like a scavenger hunt or like knocking down those stacked tiles the clubs play with, and now it's more like untangling a net. Every day my sense grows that they know more than I can get out of them. ~~It reminds me of you~~, sometimes. Perhaps you'll have better luck.

To the captain and first-and-a-half mate of the Wraith, *shortly before the latter's seventh birthday, hidden under the label of a bag of sweets that also contains a knife:*

This was the most convenient mode of delivery, but if there happen to be any celebrations occurring on board that it might be useful for, do with it what you will.

There is a campaign on the Merchant Council's table to tighten the restrictions on indentures and investigations into their sources, headed by he who is often incorrectly termed the younger Van Eck. Historically, they haven't had any luck crusading in the Barrel, but perhaps they'll make more headway with the aid of someone who's actually been there. If there's an investigation, it will make things worse for West Stave; they've been struggling for years now with a mysterious shortage of supply. Fewer diversions would also mean more ~~pigeons~~ tourists spending their time in taverns and gambling dens, which is probably not something that would be wise to mention to the Council but makes excellent motivation for those gangs who don't hold much stake in the brothels.

This missive has two recipients. A note to the latter: blades and bullets take training. Past that, just punch till you see blood, and then once more for good measure.

Note: this last was reportedly not communicated to its intended target; however, she was able to later discover the letter and read it for herself.

That's all the sage life advice I have to give—other than, don't fall out of the crow's nest. It's more trouble than it's worth.

To Kaz Brekker, a year or so later, tucked into the brim of a truly awful teal bowler hat:

I apologize for taking so long. I had to find the perfect hat. My first-and-a-half mate, as you've called her, approved of this one. She'll be eager to see you wearing it when we return, ~~and for that matter, so will I.~~

I'm going to keep this short. My suspicions of the slavers forming an alliance are gaining ground. If we return sooner than expected, you'll know why, and if we don't…you'll know why.

If things get truly dangerous, you may find yourself with a new guest. I don't expect her to be happy about it, but I'd rather she be upset and alive.

On the back of the previous note, written in an uneven scrawl (misspellings omitted for clarity):

I picked out the best hat for you. You need more colors. The captain says I might get to see you soon. Specht says she is scared, but I know she isn't scared of anything. Wait till you see how tall I am.

To Inej, written in smudged ink and smelling of whiskey, lost somewhere in the True Sea before reaching its recipient:

Went to Jes and Wylan's tonight. It's been a while. I was thinking of you, like I'm not always thinking of you, you, you, Inej, you. I close my eyes and it's you or it's Jordie or it's you floating in that damned harbor. I don't remember how much coffee and whiskey I've had or which one I had last, not counting now, and this bottle that's making a decent paperweight and a better comfort.

A while, too long, same thing really. I left the gloves here when I went like the fool that I am. You make a fool of me. I'll gladly be a fool for you, but not like this. I haven't crossed anything out yet, I'm too drunk to draw a straight line. Maybe kvas would be faster, but I'm not going to fall down the stairs looking for some. I've fallen too much today. Ever seen a stupid cripple try to walk drunk? Ever seen a wretched husk of a man land hard for you and never want to get up? You have. You've seen it every time you meet my eyes. Inej, my piety and my punishment.

I forgot to write what happened. Podge. That's to me, not you—but you, my wisdom, you knew that. It was all right at first. They sang a duet. It wasn't bad really, but I didn't know the song. Jesper gave me a wineglass, touched my hand. It was bad, but I was fine, even if I wasn't, I was enough. That wasn't the worst thing. It's not like I wasn't thinking about it, about touch, about you, your hair, your eyes, your mouth, your hands, your laugh, your smile. The things that stop me breathing and remind me to start again. Kill me for that smile or kill me with it. Just be here. That's all. That's the worst thing.

I don't even remember what Jesper did after that. Leaned on my shoulder, maybe. Something ~~Jordie~~ used to do. They have the same laugh, head thrown back and eyes shut.

I crossed something out after all. It looks awful, but I can't look at his name. I can't shake it out of my head, though maybe that's just the headache or the fact that I'm so *dizzy,* but I can't look at it. You'll know, my wraith, my keeper of secrets, the secret of my heart.

All these names and I can't write yours but once. It's the only prayer I'll ever make. Inej. Inej, Inej, InejInejInejInejInej. Come back and let me say it to you, say it until my lips are numb, gasp it as you remake me. Let me kiss the salt off your lips. Let me kiss the fear from your mind. Let me kiss you until it kills me. Kill me, and it would be all right. Let me have you. Let me tell you the hundred things I want to do to you. Do what you will with me, my saint, my salvation, my destruction, my rebirth. My darling, my love. I can't love you, but I can't do anything else.

If you send Jordan back to me, I'll take her. I'll take her home, show her the apple trees and the creek and buy her so many sweets at the bakery that you'll scowl at me in that glorious way you do—because you'll be there, too. We'll be together, we'll be safe. Just wait to send her back until I've pulled myself together.

I can't believe in gods because of you. You would be a creation worth worshiping if I thought you could be made. But the world isn't fair as long as I can love you. If there was anyone watching over you, they'd give you a better life, a better man, someone whole. You are too good to be created. I am too broken to be destroyed.

I left. They probably asked questions. I don't know. I was gone. I was sick from the bodies first and the drink later. But I am sick with love of you, too. The waters can't kill this fire for you that wants to burn me alive. Come back and let it consume me. Come back and take me for your own. Come back and be mine and sweeten my mouth with the taste of it. Come back and keep me alive.

Jordie wants to have his word with me. He's been waiting this whole time. Come back and make him go away.

Chapter End Notes

I posted some art for the last chapter on my Instagram, @fairytales_of_forever. At some point I'll probably link it in the end notes. Also, thank you all so much for your comments; replies and shout-outs really don't do justice to the fact that you're keeping me going. You're the reason I write this. <3

Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej comes back. *Only* Inej.

Chapter Notes

I'm so glad you all seemed to appreciate the last one, so let's get into some shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, I'll admit that I had just a *little* bit of fun writing it ;)

khaki83101, fear not, he won't…although the alternative might be worse…

Andhehe, I'm definitely going to do the letters thing again. It's way too much fun.

itsyagirlkath, there's more Jordan content coming, promise!

KiwisAndTea, I shouldn't necessarily be glad that I hurt you, but I kind of am.

Grishaverse4ever, not gonna lie, it killed me too.

wicked333, older Jordan is gonna be terrifying and I can't wait.

andyoudoctor, so many good things in this comment, but in particular you know that I love when people point out their favorite lines <3

the_purple_duck, the best kind of not ok is exactly what I'm going for ;)

kam_lle, I loved writing the little parts that they cross out because it's just the writing equivalent do what they do in person all the time.

LeoLou, right…cute domestic scenes…nothing to see here…*sweats*

alltheworldisinmyhead, please, you know I could never let her read it. It's so much more fun when she doesn't! 😈

katasstrophey, eeee thank you!!

Alia621, maybe someone DID find it…wait and see…;)

It's been too long.

Maybe it's his own fault, Kaz reminds himself. How was Inej supposed to respond to the rambling, desperate disaster he'd sent her when stripped of his senses? If he had never gone to the Geldstraat at all that night, never taken the chance of trying—but it was what she'd asked him to do. And he *has* been trying, but he sees now how inevitable it was that it would all fall apart.

He still hears from Jesper and Wylan sometimes, asking after him—or at least he did for a while, after that night. The messages stopped coming recently. Inej hasn't written at all.

If we return sooner than expected, you'll know why, and if we don't…you'll know why.

But she hasn't sent Jordan back to him like she said she would—though, then again, who would trust a child with someone who'd write what he had written? He had sent letters after, imploring her not to read it, apologizing, trying to brush aside the things he'd said, but how could she? It was all honest. There's a reason he trades in lies. They're as elegant as the rest of his facade, while honesty cuts and aims to kill.

He's sitting in a window booth at the Crow and Cup, the cafe he opened on the Lid some years ago, which has ironically become one of the Dregs' most successful holdings despite its shockingly legal reputation. In reality, of course, it has become a playground for a new kind of parley, his kind—where the negotiators wound only with words and pay only with secrets. Its back rooms also make excellent storage for whatever the Dregs might be smuggling into the city. Shipments can come straight here from Fifth Harbor, disguised among deliveries of pastries and coffee beans. He drops by on occasion to keep an eye on things, and today he's taken a whole booth to himself, just to be contrary. Bad for business, but better for his mood.

He took her letter out of his pocket this morning. He'd been carrying it around like a romantic fool. Anyway, the scent of salt and jasmine no longer lingers on it—though perhaps that better befits Inej, who never used to carry a scent.

In the opposite corner, a couple is sitting in the booth, pressed against the back of it but unfortunately not entirely hidden from Kaz's view. He can only see the back of the girl's head, her hair obviously dyed rusty copper, as their faces are…otherwise engaged. Kaz's scowl deepens. He's a bit surprised that the coffee in the cup he's clutching hasn't begun to boil.

He watches as a waiter approaches the couple—a waiter handpicked from the ranks of the Dregs, of course—and appears to stand patiently to the side before giving up and walking away. However, Kaz notices a flash of white sleeve and something shiny vanishing into the apron pockets before the waiter starts back to the kitchen. Upon spotting Kaz, though, he changes course and comes to stand by his table, his back carefully to the other patrons.

Kaz holds out a gloved hand. The waiter, Anders, drops a jeweled chain, a string of pearls, and two hundred *kruge* into it. Kaz knows perfectly well that Anders still has a ring and a few

more *kruge* notes tucked into his cuff, but he's not interested in criticizing a thief for stealing. What he's more than happy to do is to correct is his methods.

"I saw that," he says. Maybe from some it would be taken as encouragement, but Kaz likes to think that the dangerously slow scrape of his voice tells otherwise. "It was sloppy."

"I got the stuff, didn't I?"

Anders gets defensive, because of course he does. Unfortunately for him, Kaz isn't in the mood for it. "Yes, and a good share more than you gave me. No point in getting the scrub when the *stadwatch* will take it right back after they arrest you."

"Well, I doubt anyone else would have noticed—just because *you* saw me—"

"I have no use for flattery, Anders, and you don't have to be a decent thief to spot a bad one. You need to move faster, cover more. Now stop bothering me about it and put whatever you haven't given me in the till."

Anders is seething, but he's barely eighteen and he'll get over it. Kaz isn't feeling charitable today, and he's never had a use for anything but the best. Before he stalks off, the young man tears a sheet from his notepad and says stiffly, "I'm meant to give this to you."

Kaz plants two fingers on the scrap of paper and draws it towards him. "Oh? And who else is giving you orders?"

Anders fixes him with a half-decent glare. "The Wraith." Then he's gone, a fine illusion but no longer the center of Kaz's focus.

It takes him a few tries to grasp the edge of the paper and turn it over. His hands are shaking. He hates it.

When he manages it, the opposite side is also blank. He shouldn't really be surprised. He takes a lighter from his pocket, flicks on the flame, and holds the piece of notepaper over it. He spies the line at the top where it must have been glued into the notepad. *Clever,* he thinks, with the closest thing to a smile he's worn all day.

The words appear when touched by heat—sharp and scrawling and smelling of nothing at all. As he reads them, Kaz's heartbeat grows loud in his ears. There's a distant rushing of blood or waves. The old burning of vengeance simmers, but intermixed with it as there's never been there is an awful, blinding fear.

They have Jordan. They want me to destroy my ship to get her back. I'm sending this as quickly as I can, and likely it will get back to Ketterdam before I do. Meet me on the docks. Don't bother with the warehouse.

He checks the note front and back, desperate to find more words that he might have missed. There's nothing. The world is red and black. Maybe Inej doesn't know yet who the slavers are, who's taken Jordan—he'll learn each of their names and paint them on the docks in blood. He'll string them up from their masts like chandeliers. He'll make the name of the

brother who deserved better and the daughter who deserves the world, write it in bones and burn it on the streets of Ketterdam.

But first he needs to find Inej.

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The ship has barely docked before Inej gives up on waiting and leaps from the rail down to the docks, and then she's running, running, flying in bounds down to the dark shape on the quay. She imagines slavers' blood under her feet. She imagines the True Sea running scarlet. She imagines Jordan back and safe in her arms.

Kaz is there when her stride falters, when she stops running and starts shaking and her knees threaten to give out. Some distant part of her realizes that he doesn't even hesitate before holding her up, holding her, letting her lean into his chest and hear the wild runaway rhythm of his heart. She all but crashed into him, and now she stands there, ink and coffee and the sudden presence of him around her after four years' absence making her almost dizzy. Despite having had the voyage back to think and plan and process, all of a sudden it all feels as fresh as a gaping wound, and Inej can't breathe.

His hand on her back is stiff but strong. His thumb traces unsteady circles on her shoulder. She hates how much she wants to cry.

"The message said to meet them here," she says into his shirt, her voice steady but in the way of something wobbling on the wire, suspended on the trembling edge of falling. "Here, at Fifth Harbor. They know about Jordan and they know about you. I don't—we were being so careful—"

"Inej." Kaz's voice in her ear is harsh, but enough so to remind her to breathe. He steps back from her, but he's still holding her arms. He looks so much the same. Too old for twenty-six, the lines of his face harder and more severe, but then he's always looked too old. He bends to her eye level, black eyes burning into hers until they're all she sees. "They played their hand. They already told you everything they know and asked to meet you on your territory. They're setting themselves up to lose."

Illogically, she's furious at him for not being more afraid. He wasn't there, and it makes her want to scream, even though he couldn't be there and she was the one who'd wanted to leave. *You weren't there either,* hisses a voice in her mind that sounds like Heleen's honeyed whisper. And she wasn't, was she? One moment with her back turned, one raid gone wrong, and she can only imagine her daughter's cries. Did Jordan scream? How could she have gone unheard? How could Inej have missed it? How could she have failed her child in exactly the same way she'd been—was this how her parents had felt? How could they stand it?

" *Inej.* " Kaz's voice is sharp enough now to cut.

She glares at him. "What?"

"You need to breathe. You're not going to get her back by panicking," he says, his voice infuriatingly calm. Maybe he's trying to be comforting, but Inej wants to grab him by the

collar and throw him into the harbor. It might not be helpful, but if he seemed worried at all she'd at least know that he cared.

"Doesn't seem as if you'd be bothered either way," she says stiffly, pulling away from him.

Kaz's expression shutters. "By which you mean, what? I'm not falling to pieces and I'm trying to do something useful? I suppose I forgot that you're not above sentimentality, but save it for the reunion, will you?"

Inej backs away, shaking her head, unable to believe what she's hearing. She was wrong—he has changed, and she doesn't have the time to deal with it. "One day I'm leaving this city for good. I never seem to like what you've become when I get back."

Maybe, she thinks as she returns to her ship, that day will be today—but first, she has to make a plan. If Kaz deigns to inconvenience himself, he can help. With or without him, though, she's getting her daughter back.

Jordan/Alby

Chapter Summary

Jordan makes a new friend. Alby draws a map.

Chapter Notes

andyoudoctor, I love this comment! It's so thoughtful and is honestly the exact reaction I was interested to see :)

itsyagirlkath, don't worry, the kanej revenge squad is coming to get Jordan ;)

Andhehe, I really love the conflict in this comment, honestly, and I hope I resolve it to your satisfaction :)

whynotcherries, pain is the plan :D

khaki83101, but what if…YES Jordan ;)

KiwisAndTea, it'll be happy again soonish :D

Alia621, interesting that you think it's Felix…

LeoLou, I'm very proud of my cruelty ;)

Wicked333, they just need to communicate (which of course they're notoriously bad at)

VioletFahrenheit, as previously stated, pain is the plan ;)

alltheworldisinmyhead, no that's good!! Be mad at her! She can make mistakes :)

SpaceAce1123, this is hard for her :(

Up until today, Jordan has never liked being underestimated. Now she's found it quite useful. It's very typical of men (and adults in general) to find a nine-year-old girl, thin as a whip, and think it won't take much to hold her, but she is a *pirate,* thank you very much. A pirate and a lockpick who keeps knives in her shoes. And one in her hair. At least they were smart enough to take her knives, which is frustrating because now she'll need new ones. She'd at least like to get the one back that she stabbed that guy with.

By what little she knows, she and Inej and the crew were on their way back to Kerch, to see her da who Inej is always telling her about. She knows how much Inej wants her to remember him. There's something there—colors and feelings, mostly, the way a lot of her memories of being little are. She puts her hand in the pocket of the vest he sent her when she turned nine and holds tight to her watch, which she guesses was too old and boring for the slavers to take. She traces the letters *J.R.* with her fingertips. She asked Kaz in one of her letters what they meant, but even though he always answered her questions, he didn't answer that one.

If she could ask him a question now, what would he say? He'd tell her to think, Jordan knows that. She's known that this whole time. Even in the black hold of a ship, unable to move or to see, alone, her mind had worked just as well in the dark as in the daylight.

She doesn't know where she is, except that she's probably in Kerch, if the slavers really were taking her to Ketterdam. They tried to scare her, telling her about how her mama had to blow up her ship or they were going to sell Jordan. They talked about the things that would be done to her, things Jordan already knew a little bit about from living with sailors, but she knew better. Kaz and Inej have been telling her since she was little that her body is hers to do with what she wants and nobody else's, and if they try to do things with it she should stab them or shoot them or kick them somewhere very specific. She hadn't had time to get a gun and they took her knives, but she knows how to kick *hard.*

They didn't like that and threw her down in the hold, and even now her back still hurts, but Jordan is smart and she'd known they wouldn't kill her. Kaz likes to write about the value of things, how you can pay in more than just money, and Jordan knows just how much she's worth—and it's more as long as she's alive. She knows things, not that she's going to tell anyone.

One of those things happens to be how to pick locks. She'd prayed a quick thank-you to the Saints when she was put in cuffs instead of tied up with rope. She knew how to get out of cuffs and how to make it look like she hadn't, and how to swing them at the right point on someone's head and wriggle away and run where they couldn't see her. Port towns provided plenty of places to climb, but now she's been walking all day and made it into the country.

Jordan is at the edge of the woods, sitting on a rock by a little creek. She holds on tight to the watch and feels it tick and tries not to cry. She is very strong and brave and fast, and she's a pirate, but right now she's used up just about all of those things. She's lost, and doesn't have her knives, and more than anything she feels like a scared little girl.

Kaz and Inej would probably have smart things to tell her—or they wouldn't be here to begin with. Her mama would have known where to go instead of running off into the middle of nowhere. Jordan's feet hurt, and her eyes are stinging from trying not to cry, and she can hold the watch as tight as she can but it just pushes the *J.R.* into her hand and reminds her that she doesn't know what it means and her da isn't here to tell her.

She pulls her hand out of her pocket and pushes herself off of the rock onto hurting feet. She'll just go a little bit further, she decides. If she has to stop and sleep in the woods, she will. She just hopes that it doesn't rain.

As Jordan crosses out of the woods, the meadow in front of her rises up into a hill spotted with wildflowers. She bends down and picks a dandelion and blows on it, watching the fuzzy bits fly away into the wind. She makes a wish—that someone in this big, empty, lonely world will find her. Jordan is a very little pirate, after all. Sometimes even pirates need help.

When she makes it to the top of the hill, there's a little dot on the flat line of grass that runs into the sky. She starts walking a little faster, and realizes that it's a house! She has to be careful, of course, since she knows plenty well that not everyone is nice, but she can at least get close enough to see.

Her wish came true, Jordan thinks, or maybe the Saints heard her prayer. She whispers a *thank you* to the sky, where both the Saints and the dandelion seeds are, and her tired feet start to run.

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Alby is having a very boring day, right up until he meets *her*.

He's done all of his lessons already, and he guesses he could start the ones for tomorrow, except that they're all boring and today's lessons were an awful chore to get through. He can go outside, but his papa is so paranoid that he has to stay close to the house, in sight of the windows, even with all of the awesome woods and meadows everywhere. It's stupid, but his papa has been scared like that for as long as Alby can remember.

He's too old for his toys at a very proud ten, so he sits by the veranda and draws pictures in the dirt, his legs splayed out in front of him. He's working on drawing a map when he spots something moving and looks up.

As the thing gets closer, he realizes it's a girl, maybe his age. She's wearing some kind of black pants and a black shirt and a red vest that are all grubby and messed-up, and her black hair is halfway out of a braid. She's barefoot and slowing down out of a run, kicking dust everywhere.

She is the prettiest girl he's ever seen.

Alby realizes his mouth is hanging open and quickly shuts it. He can just hear his tutor telling him that he'll swallow a fly doing that.

"Who are you?" he asks. He has a little bit of an accent, leftover from his Kaelish mum who he doesn't really remember. He only ever notices it because he sounds different from his father, but suddenly he's worried about what the girl will think of it.

She stops short and frowns at him, crossing his arms. "Who are *you?"*

Alby's mouth is open again. He snaps it shut and scrambles to his feet, messing up his map in the process. "I'm Alby. I live here. What are you doing here?"

She takes a step back and looks at him suspiciously. "What are *you* doing here?"

Alby blinks. "I just said that. I live here."

“Oh yeah?” She puts her hand on her hip and points at the remains of his map. “What’s that?”

“A map,” says Alby, a little self-conscious about it all of a sudden.

“Oh, good,” she says, bouncing over to look. “I’m lost.”

She is standing next to him. Alby tries very hard not to hold his breath. She tips her head to one side, and the top of it almost hits his face. Her hair is shiny even though it’s all dusty. Alby is amazed.

“What’s it a map of?” she says, stepping away from him and crinkling her nose. Alby is a little disappointed.

“Kerch,” he says, waving his hand at the map. “Or what I remember from my geography lessons.” He frowns and messes up his hair. “I don’t pay that much attention in geography. Where are you lost from?”

“Ketterdam,” she says, settling both fists at her hips and looking at the map, her head tilted to one side. Alby is jealous of her thinking face. It’s scary.

He frowns, though. “Why do you want to go to Ketterdam? It sounds awful. My father told me never to go there.”

“Well, that’s where *my* da is,” says the girl, looking up at him with very big, serious brown eyes. “And I’m Jordan.”

Alby is too happy about knowing her name to ask her why she’s decided to tell him now. *Jordan. Jordan, Jordan, Jordan.* He tucks it away in his heart like a secret. “Wait here, Miss Jordan,” he says, jumping up and running to the door. “I’ll go get you a real map.”

He gets the one off his desk that he’s supposed to use for geography and just hopes his tutor won’t mind. He can always get a new one. He’s about to run back outside when he stops, goes back for a pen, and writes his address on the back of the map.

When he goes back outside, he jumps down the steps and runs to Jordan, who’s sitting in the dirt with her legs stretched out. It’s late afternoon, and the sun makes her look like she’s made of gold. Alby almost trips over his feet.

“Here, Miss Jordan,” he says proudly, holding out the map to her and pointing at it. “See, here’s where we are—and here’s Ketterdam. Are you really gonna walk all the way there?”

“Well, I’m gonna run some of it,” Jordan says seriously, taking the map from him and looking at the route he pointed out.

“If you want to get there faster…” Alby gasps and bounces on the balls of his feet. “You could stow away on a ship! There’s a port right close to here that takes stuff to the city all the time!” He’d kept the pen, and he circles the place he’s talking about on the map. He’s jealous of Jordan; she gets to go on a real adventure, and he can’t even leave his yard.

Jordan does the thinking face again, her head tilted, looking off into the distance. After a few seconds, she nods and rolls up the map, getting to her feet.

“Wait!” says Alby. Feeling shy for no reason that he can understand, he adds, “I put my address on the back. Write me a letter when you get there, please?”

“Okay.” Jordan smiles at him for the first time, showing her teeth. She’s missing her canines.

Alby makes sure his mouth is shut.

Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz learns to take orders. Captain Ghafa plans her revenge.

Chapter Notes

This one is a little shorter, as transition chapters tend to be, but I got to explore some conflict and give you some scary Kanej, so I think we still won. Now, of course, for some shout-outs~

andyoudoctor, I think my favorite thing about this comment is actually that you forgot Jordan was an OC. Makes my little heart happy.

wicked333, It will be a very cute disaster if you turn out to be right ;)

KiwisAndTea, you asked for angst, this is just the beginning :D

SpaceAce1123, little kids taking their ridiculous little selves seriously is underrated as comedy.

whynotcherries, you have no idea how long I've been waiting to bring him in, honestly.

Alia621, right? And Jordan is just a fraction right now of the terror she's going to be when she gets older.

alltheworldisinmyhead, I cannot wait to write the reunion, and even more so for you all to read it!!

LeoLou, yeah, I kind of hated having to do such a big time skip, but in order for the plot to work we have to hurt the characters (which is a pastime of mine anyway, lol).

secretseecretsecrets1989, Inej has taught her daughter well <3

purpleann, It'll be interesting to see how long it takes the parents to find out...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz stands on the dock, considering the things he hates. He has a plentiful list—a fact well-known enough that it's practically part of his persona. However, he is deciding at this moment that the thing he hates most is feeling helpless.

Despite his telling Inej all those years ago never to sneak up on him again, she'd crept into his heart, silent and light-footed, and cleared out the cobwebs, shorn up its walls, opened the windows and let the sun in, and by the time he'd bothered to inspect the state of things, it was too late. Even in his desperate avoidance of accepting it, something that has slowly fallen away (and fallen apart, he'd thought, with that letter), he'd failed to account for the full magnitude of what it meant.

He has no solace from the fact that she has hurt him. Perhaps he'd just grown to assume he would never need it.

If it had been anyone else, it would have been easy—plan his vengeance, strike them where it hurts, find their seams and tender edges and shred them apart. He could buoy himself with promises of the suffering to come.

But this is Inej. It brings him no joy to see her in pain. It's like the stories his father used to tell him, of bonded souls who felt each other's hurts. He'd often wondered what they would do if they were enemies. But it didn't matter—the fascination of having someone who was meant for you faded when he realized that there was no such thing as destiny; if he wanted something, he had to take it for himself.

And maybe she's right. Maybe the discomfort coiled in his chest, heavy and ill-shaped for the space, ought to be something more like guilt. He hasn't been there, has he? He's written to Jordan as often as he can, said as much as he can while still keeping her safe—and in the end he failed to do that, didn't he?

Inej hasn't said a word about the letter. Maybe there just wasn't time, and he certainly understands her being preoccupied, but he has a sense of something worse. It's useless to ignore his intuition for the sake of making himself feel better, he reprimands himself, and yet he just can't allow the thought to form. Because if that's true, then it's his fault, all of it, and he is left with nothing but guilt tearing him limb from limb behind a stony expression.

Conjecture won't solve this. Vengeance won't absolve it. The only hope he has—and he is desperate—is to act. The *Wraith* lies before him, a plot being crafted in his absence onboard. Kaz puts on his scheming face and starts towards it.

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Inej hears the click of heels and cane and doesn't turn around. The chest that doubles as a desk in her cabin is covered in maps and charts and blank pieces of paper, most of them ink-stained, and in the corner of it all, not quite out of her vision, is the note that she pretends she hasn't read every five minutes. It doesn't change, of course. It doesn't say anything new. Destroy your ship or your daughter is gone. For all Inej knows she's gone already. She scrubs the back of her hand over her eyes, half-expecting Kaz to make some remark about the uselessness of her tears. Instead, a piece of fabric is pressed into her bare hand.

She looks up. It's a handkerchief, silk and probably stolen, although where he would have nicked a black one Inej has no idea. She meets his eyes to gauge his expression, but it's unreadable as always, which makes her angrier than it should.

She doesn't thank him, nor does she wipe her eyes. She clutches the kerchief in her fist and turns back to the desk, but if she's honest she has no idea what to do with any of what's spread before her. She can't think right. What is *wrong* with her?

"Do you know how they found out?" Kaz steps up to stand beside her, the question infuriatingly careful. It's his old habit of saying everything as if it means nothing to him at all.

Inej pushes a handful of flyaway strands off of her face, but that just results in more of them falling loose. She gives up. "Maybe one of those first letters? I know I mocked you for being so careful, but—and yet that was years ago, so why—"

"I doubt it." Though Kaz's rasp is rough as gravel, it cuts through her panicked rambling as cleanly as a blade. "No sense in waiting, what, three years? It wouldn't have taken them that long to find her, either." He steps around to the end of the makeshift desk, back into her view, bending with his gloved fingertips resting on one of her maps.

His face has lost any boyishness it once retained; the lines of his jaw are stark and shaded, his cheeks more hollow, a new scar cutting just beneath his ear. The sides of his hair are shaved shorter and more sternly than they were once. Inej liked them longer. She liked him better before. She desperately hopes that she still knows him, some part of him.

What she does know is that he's not at rest. The wheels of his wicked mind are turning, but they are not crafting a plan, they are debating what to say. She wants to scream that that's a waste of time, that his reputation is the least of their worries right now, but she doesn't have the time or the energy to fight with him again. And whether or not she wants to admit it, she needs his help.

"Say it," she says, pulling one of the maps towards her, her brow furrowed as she looks at it—away from Kaz. "You can't remove the personal from this, Kaz, it's my daughter and supposedly yours too. Whatever it is, say it."

He hasn't been moving, but nonetheless she could swear that he goes still. "It's not important who is to blame," he says slowly, each word clipped as if to declare that it is final and there's nothing else to say. "When did they tell you to meet them?"

Inej frowns at the change of tack, but she can at least agree that they don't have time for the trivial. "Here, today. The start of sunset."

Kaz scoffs lightly. "How trite."

"Don't let me hear you, Kaz Brekker, mocking someone else for being dramatic," Inej says. She's still frowning, but this is all right, this is familiar—she is one of few people in the world who are privileged enough to tease him and get away with it, and as long as she's thoroughly abusing that privilege, *something* is right with the world.

"I didn't say dramatic," he says, in the absent sort of murmur that tells her his thoughts are elsewhere. In this case, that's just where she wants them to be. He reaches across the table and picks up one of her charts. "I said trite. I mean, sunset, really?"

“I suppose you’d prefer twilight with the mist rolling in off the canals,” Inej says drily, her eyes scanning her map of Ketterdam’s harbor. “To make an entrance.” If it’s Fifth Harbor they’re coming to, then there are really only three points of entry, all visible from a good distance depending on one’s vantage point. But seeing them coming doesn't mean knowing how to stop them.

“I’d prefer anytime and anywhere I have the upper hand,” says Kaz, shuffling the papers, “so it doesn’t really matter.” At least his confidence hasn’t changed. She can’t really call it arrogance, because even if she doesn’t like it—and she’s fairly sure nobody does—he tends to be right.

“Can you and Wylan make it look like the ship has been destroyed?” she asks, looking up from the map, desperately casting for some solution. Kaz knows (probably better than she does) that they shouldn’t go into this expecting fair play, but if there’s any chance of pulling off the trade…

“That would be quite the vanishing act. Your specialty, isn’t it?” Kaz muses, his hands as lean and agile as ever as they make some order of the cluttered papers. He looks over at her, his movements as sharp and decisive as the lines of his face. “Easier just to get her back. Do you have any idea how many of them there are?”

“It doesn’t matter. There could be a hundred. All that a number tells us is how many severed limbs they’ll have to clean off the docks.” Inej usually isn’t one to talk of bloodthirst like this, but this is her daughter. This is her beating, bleeding heart, back in crude and calloused hands.

For Jordan, she will be dangerous. She will be the monster that monsters fear. She’s not so kind as a Saint. She is righteous. She is justice. She is the smoke rising from the fire and the ashes that foretell the phoenix. She’ll leave the match to slip from their fingers and burn them alive.

Once, she was afraid to be dangerous. She thought that it made her dirty, broken, less. Dangerous, now, is the only way that she feels clean.

She looks back at Kaz, hesitant somehow to see his response. His face hasn’t much changed, except that the corner of his mouth is curled up, slight as a hairpin and twice as sharp. “I’m glad you’re on board,” he says. “I thought you might try for stealth, to stop them before they got here.”

Inej checks her knives and turns to face him. She squares her shoulders, the tell she’s never been able to lose—but let the world know that she’s preparing for a fight. Let them know and be afraid. Very afraid.

“Let the bastards come,” she says. “We’ll run the harbor red with blood and fire.”

Now the other corner of his mouth is curved with its twin. “As you command, Captain Ghafa.”

Chapter End Notes

The passage about Inej being dangerous is a nod to my Inej character study, "used to be mine", which I was re-reading the other day (as one does).

Jordan/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan becomes a stowaway. Kaz takes a leap of faith.

Chapter Notes

khaki83101, at least Kaz knows who's in charge here ;)

wicked333, yeah, crossing Kanej is the definition of stupid, but oh well.

eekabee, ahh, I'm so happy that you liked that part!

andyoudoctor, fear not, I have a family reunion planned in every sense of the word—I just like to make you all wait ;)

alltheworldisinmyhead, I think it's both comforting and scary to Kaz and Inej to realize the extent of what they've created, lol.

KiwisAndTea, I don't know if you asked for it necessarily, but I'm just being so nice and giving it to you anyway ;)

toovrede, I hope this update is all that you imagined (and you stick around for the rest!) Lovely to have you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan is hungry and thirsty and more scared than she has ever been in her life, but she still hasn’t been caught.

Right now, she’s tucked into the folded sail of a mercher ship, using it like a hammock. The sun is hot on her dark hair, and there's barely enough shade for her to lay in, but at least she's pretty sure nobody can see her up here. They’re only transporting salt and grains and the like, so the crew is sparse; she knows because she started out in the hold, hiding herself in a stack of crates until she managed to slip out and steal something to eat.

She is her mama’s daughter, so she knows how to sneak and she knows how to climb. She steals food and water and sneaks around the ship, a little shadow like Inej taught her, moving to a new hiding place every time she’s exhausted the last. So far she hasn’t had to fight any of the crew, which is good because even though she would probably win, then they would know they had a stowaway.

Her latest hiding spot—and hopefully her last—is in one of the higher sails that folds to create a nice little pocket, Jordan-sized. It's not easy work to shimmy up and down the mast when the gnawing emptiness inside her gets to be too much, but she's much less likely to get discovered here as a whole. Plus, she can see, over the wide ocean and now to the land.

She can see that they're almost back to the city.

Her memories of Ketterdam are as hazy as the smoke and fog that blur the tops of the buildings. Most of what she knows is from stories and the letters Kaz used to write. But she still knows it when she sees the gray blob of land, slowly getting clearer and clearer as the ship gets near. Suddenly, the empty feeling in her belly is replaced by a whir of excitement. She's almost home.

Now she just has to find a man she hasn't seen in four years. *Dressed in black, crow-headed cane*, says Inej's voice in her head. It's been comforting to pretend that her mama is there to tell her what to do, but she should probably get out of the habit of pretending.

She also has to get off of this ship.

She can't just jump straight from the mast; it's too far down, and anyway she's heard that there are sharks in this harbor. But she won't be able to make it back into the hold—she'll be found when they start unloading all of those big crates. She has to get down from the sail and off of the ship, unnoticed but close to the city.

She'll need to figure out how to keep Alby's map dry, because she's going to have to swim.

<><><>

The sun has barely slipped towards the horizon before they're preparing to leave the harbor, out to meet the *Hawk* within sight of Ketterdam. Kaz knows that the *Hawk* 's crew, the bastards who have Jordan, want to put on a show—and maybe he would have done the same. But a man can go a lifetime in the Barrel and never know that the same kind of show isn't always right, that sometimes a dark, clean facade works better than fire and glamour ever will. Kaz was smart enough to learn it quick and not forget.

Now he's wishing he doesn't have so much talent for keeping a polished exterior, that for once words would come to him, or at least something would arise on his face, but more and more as the crew of the *Wraith* prepare to sail out into Kerch waters does his skin feel like a mask. He doesn't know how, anymore, to do anything but keep his head on straight and anything else in the periphery.

He chances a look at Inej, like he hasn't been doing that every half a minute since they came up on deck. She stands by the wheel of her ship, talking to that Kaelish girl who's been in her crew almost since the start, wearing a vest that's too large for her with a belt at her waist. She doesn't look back at him. She used to.

Kaz flexes his hands, feels the leather of his gloves tighten. The bizarre desire wells up to strip them off and fling them into the harbor, to remember how it is to be in contact with the

world and feel things without a wall in between. But that's not the smart move. That's leaving himself blatantly vulnerable when Jordan needs his strength.

He's losing something. Control—he's losing control. Over himself, over everyone, over everything. His mind and pulse haven't stopped racing since before Inej returned, and he wonders if he'll survive to see them cross the finish line.

Someone yells from up by the figurehead. Kaz can't understand it, but he doesn't need to. He can see the shape of the *Hawk* approaching them, not rushed but thoroughly determined in its pace.

"That's your cue." Suddenly Inej is beside him. He hopes he only missed her approach because he wasn't paying attention, and not because he's lost his sense for her. He'd rather go blind.

"So eager to be rid of me?" he queries drily, but he's more worried about it being truthful than he's had reason to be in a long time.

"Just to get Jordan back. And this was your plan—argue with your reflection if you don't like it," she says.

Kaz glances over the rail into the water, but it's just black, not even a silhouette returning his skeptical gaze. He wonders what Inej would say that means. He doesn't ask her.

Instead, he makes his way back onto the docks, the tap of his cane seeming especially loud in the closing evening. People will be flooding the Barrel before long, but for now, Ketterdam waits—eager, suspended, not complacent, but at least temporarily at rest. Kaz wishes he could say the same for himself. He walks as if on slender pins.

Barely has he disembarked before the *Wraith* is leaving its berth, out to draw parallel with the *Hawk* well within sight of the skyline of Ketterdam. Kaz doesn't like the distance, but neither does he want to invite slavers onto his shores. Besides, they need it for Wylan's little trick to work—distance always helps a good illusion.

Another ship has been slow coming in, not to Fifth Harbor but to a berth further down. He keeps a cautious eye on it, but it passed the *Wraith* and the *Hawk* without a stutter, so hopefully it'll drop its cargo and mind its business.

Kaz doesn't like *hopefully. Hopefully* doesn't get him paid. *Hopefully* doesn't get his daughter back. But he can't go tromping down the docks to chase a cargo ship when Inej and Jordan need him here.

As he watches, the *Wraith* and the *Hawk* draw nearer to each other—they look like toy ships, pieces in a game. To the slavers, Kaz realizes with a fresh bolt of rage, they are. But he'd be a hypocrite to rise to fury because someone didn't care for the lives they were playing with, wouldn't he? He does it every day.

And for Jordan, he thinks, checking the gun in his coat's pocket, he'll do it again.

He's by the warehouses now, having made his way up the quay, but movement draws his eye to one of the docks, a few over from where the mercher's ship just arrived. A dark shape in the water.

Rising out of the water.

Wet hands clawing the boards. A child's hands. The shining slick of wet skin.

Jordie?

The question is nonsensical, but so are his thoughts. For nearly two decades has Kaz trained himself to fight, but they fall away from him like rotting flesh, leaving him bare, vulnerable, with only the raw desire to run. He hadn't even realized how on edge he's been this whole time. He can't hear the waves over the roar of his heartbeat.

Dark hair, wet and stringy. Desperation. Dark eyes meeting his, and a flash of recognition.

There's a whirlpool in his mind, of *nine years old* and *Jordan* and the salt-fish stink of the harbor. It's him and it's Jordie and it isn't. It's a shivering little girl, her hair falling out of the braid she always wanted, her skin warm bronze and not at all the fish-belly pale of a corpse.

The harbor took one Jordan from him, but it has returned another.

Her arms are shaking as she crawls up onto the dock and stops there, on her hands and knees, head hanging low and dripping water onto the boards. Kaz takes a step towards her, then a few more. Normally he'd be searching for a plan, an angle, but right now his mind is just scrambling to rearrange its composure.

"Jordan?" he asks. His voice comes out sounding all wrong—he knew he couldn't manage to sound comforting, but he'd hoped at least for something shy of threatening, something that sounded safe. Instead, he almost sounds as if *he* is the one afraid.

She looks up, and he knows her face. It's thinner, less of a baby's roundness in her cheeks, but those deep-set eyes are the same. "Kaz?"

She pushes herself to her feet. *Help her,* his mind says, but he can't make himself move. His eyes go to the *Wraith* and the *Hawk* , closer now, side by side, some sort of connection established between them. He has to tell Inej.

The little girl who he does and doesn't know takes a few steps towards him. She is long-limbed and wiry, dressed in red and black, scared and exhausted. A tear leaks down her cheek and she scrubs it away. Kaz wonders who taught her to do that. She speaks again. "Da?"

She is three in his arms and she is five at Jesper and Wylan's and she is nine, right in front of him, far too old in far too short a time. He goes to her, strips off his coat, and puts it around her. He remembers how she used to hide in it. "Yes," he says. He may not be able to do anything else the way that he should, but at least he can keep her warm.

He looks her in her watering eyes, ready to tell her every lie that his wicked and well-practiced mouth can conjure—that she is safe, that she is home—but it is because he's

looking into her face that he doesn’t see the explosion.

He only hears the rush and the roar, and when he looks up, the *Wraith* is already burning.

That’s wrong. Something is wrong. It wasn’t supposed to happen yet. It looks too real. They don’t even have Jordan.

The cacophony crescendos in unison. *Inej is on that ship.*

He’s already shed his heavy coat, so he lays down his cane and doesn’t bother with the buttons of his vest. He shouldn’t be leaving Jordan when he’s just found her, shouldn’t be doing what he’s doing because of a thousand perfectly good reasons, and if he were thinking he wouldn’t. But Inej is his tell, his weak spot. He isn't thinking. All his cold logic and patient vengeance is gone.

It’s her own damn fault, he tells himself as he dives into the harbor and starts to swim.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a minute since I plugged my Instagram, but for what it's worth, I post fanart, incorrect quotes, story updates, and the like @fairytales_of_forever :)

I've been getting stressed about this story as of late, but your comments really keep me going and we have some exciting relationship development coming up! Thank you all for the feedback and support...it's so much more than I ever dreamed of receiving <3

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej puts the pieces together, and then it all falls apart.

Chapter Notes

hardly_a_ghost, I hope you don't mind my extending the suspense ;)

toovrede, it shouldn't be too much longer :)

Andhehe, yesss, this chapter definitely resolves that cliffhanger…

andyoudoctor, you had so much to say and I just want to thank you so much for this comment!

whynotcherries, I basically live to put you all in pain <3

thephonyqueenofengland, the best relationships can pick up right where they left off <3

alltheworldisinmyhead, I'm so glad you liked/hated/loved those parts, lol.

the_purple_duck, I promise we'll get to a resolution…er, soon.

Adriennezzz, we love to see the character development <3

wicked333, I hope this chapter is all you were waiting for!

that1annoyingbitch, it's my calling to hurt my readers, but I generally make it better afterwards ;)

KiwisAndTea, reunion is coming next week, I PROMISE.

LeoLou, honestly, the speechlessness is the best comment I could ask for. <3

Everything's going to hell in a handbasket, and then there is fire.

Not-so-very-much earlier:

The ships meet in Ketterdam's harbor, barely more than a swim from the docks—if one has a good bit of endurance and isn't afraid of the fabled sharks, that is. Inej has enough claws and teeth of her own to fall into that category, and today she's baring all of them.

She has knives strapped to her arms, to her legs, in her vest, one down her back, even one in her hair. The guns on the ship itself won't be of much use, but the ones her crew carry will do just fine. The exchange is supposed to be peaceful, but Inej knows better—she hasn't spent this much of her life at the side of a master con artist for nothing. She knows her senses. The harbor doesn't smell of salt and fish so much as violence.

And for once, she is hungry for a taste of it.

She will not let the *Hawk* reach her city. The opportunities for trickery are countless when a ship meets the shore. Out in the harbor, there is only so much one can hide. Inej wonders if the slavers passed the Reaper's Barge on the way into the city—for that is how she intends to have them leave it.

She picks out who's in charge on the *Hawk* almost immediately. It's not always the captain who leads the crew, whether they realize it or not, but that isn't of much consequence to Inej. In this case, it's a young man—younger than her by a good five years at least—with a thick sheaf of dark hair and eyes black even in the dying sun. It strikes Inej that she thinks of twenty as young, now. It had seemed unfathomably old when it was an age she wasn't sure she'd live to see.

His stance is a collection of odd angles, as if he was put together by estimates, without exact measurements or much care for results. He's dressed a notch more nicely than the ship's crew—still a sailor, still a slaver, but one who's doing better than just getting by. Inej wonders how many lives his clothes cost.

Jordan's will not be one of them.

Inej leaps up and balances on the rail. She uses one of the bits of sleight-of-hand that Kaz taught her to conceal a knife in her hand, small enough to hide but wicked enough to hit and hurt its mark.

We'll run the harbor red with blood and fire.

The ships are close. They could board the *Hawk* by swinging over if it came to it. But that's an invitation that Inej is too wise to take.

The young man who seems to be in charge is close enough for Inej to see the freckles on his face. "Where's Brekker? You'd think that he would leap to your defense, wouldn't you?"

Inej's balance holds steady. She half-expected to be bitterly reminded of Kaz's stoic face, of his cursed patience, but instead what she remembers is the feeling of being in his arms, of him holding her steady while the world crumbled around them. It felt safe in a way that it shouldn't have. A way she can't think about now.

“I might, but why would you?” Inej returns, raising her voice over the distance and waves. “Where is my daughter?”

“Just the way he wrote about you,” the young man says, a smile creeping languidly across his face. “Such pretty names, he called you. You’d almost believe he had a heart.”

Inej’s own heart nearly stops, but not because of his words. For all she knows, he’s bluffing. There might have been some other way to realize that they were working together and to extrapolate from that. Besides, the letters she’d received from him were stilted, formal; Kaz wouldn’t write some poetic missive, even to her, if forced at gunpoint.

No, her world is slowed by the sight of a small figure, draped in black and hooded, being led onto the deck.

“So, are you going to destroy your ship with your crew on it? Follow it to the waves like a good captain should?” The dark-haired man grabs the child roughly and holds her beside him by the back of her neck. “Although then, of course, your little girl would be orphaned again. Very tragic. But it brings out the best in some of us.” Inej itches to bury her knife in his heart, but there are pieces of this that she needs to understand first.

She’d known that the slavers were starting to work together, but this man is no ordinary member of their league. He knows about Kaz, and somehow he found out about Jordan. Could he be telling the truth about that letter? Obviously he has a vested interest in the destruction of the *Wraith*, but there’s a wrath about him, barely kept in check, that feels personal.

Felix Pieterse is dead, she insists to herself. Kaz doesn’t miss. And she and Kaz both have their share of enemies. But if, somehow…

First things first. She gets down from the rail, takes hold of a rope, and swings across to the deck of the Hawk. She lands perhaps ten, fifteen feet from the man who can’t be Felix. Her limited crew—Specht, Fionn, Xian, and a few others she trusts—don’t yet follow; the breaking of the peace is inevitable, but having them follow her would either start a full-out battle or concede to destroying the Wraith, neither of which Inej wants if she can help it.

Besides, she has other concerns as soon as she takes a proper look at the hooded child.

“That’s not her.”

The young man narrows his eyes like a smug cat and puts a gun to the child’s head. She whimpers. The voice isn’t Jordan’s. “You know, I’m glad Brekker isn’t here. He wouldn’t bother to save someone else’s child.”

Cold rage crystallizes Inej’s body, from her thundering heart to the steel of her knives. She moves as if to put up a hand in surrender, but at the last second she reveals and throws the hidden knife, straight for the man, whose identity she no longer cares for.

He doesn’t move the gun. Nonetheless, the knife hasn’t quite left her hand when she gets shot.

Inej goes to her knees, pain exploding through the side of her stomach. She clamps a hand to the spot and dizzily wonders how shocked they'll be when it comes away bloodless.

When it's Fabrikator-made, bulletproof material absorbs impact better than the regular sort, so Inej will get off with a nasty bruise rather than anything seriously broken. She has the absurd thought that she's going to have to thank Kaz for letting her wear his vest—and perhaps even to apologize.

Someone's helping her up. Inej was already winded, and her breath stutters. Their clumsy hand goes to the freshly bruised spot, and Inej has to swallow down a gasp of pain. Specht, she distantly realizes, seeing tattoos in her periphery.

"I'm fine," she says, pushing him away. She'd rather not dwell on the bright spark of panic that rose at the unexpected contact. Besides, she has more important things to be doing.

It's chaos. Her crew has almost entirely boarded the *Hawk* in her defense, and at least for now they're holding their own. The dark-haired man is still roughly where he was, although there's no sight of the gun or the child. Inej can only hope that her crew has retrieved them both.

Her side still throbbing, she draws one of her longer knives—better for combat where swords are involved—and leaps up to balance on the railing, giving her an advantage of height and a way to see where she's needed in the melee. The combat has carried over to the *Wraith*, although the crew of the *Hawk* is larger and they are as much ransacking her ship as fighting on it. As much as she would like to throw them all into the harbor and let them take their chances, Inej knows better that her crew needs her more than her ship does.

Besides, her ship is safer with the *Hawk's* men on it.

She can't get much of a running start, so it's a tricky jump, but she propels herself off of the rail and up onto the mast of the *Hawk*. It's a miracle that she manages to grip it, frankly, and she murmurs a prayer of thanks before getting hold of a rope and kicking off into an arc; she'd like to catch the *Hawk's* captain with a kick to the face, but he's too good for that, and he ducks. Inej releases the rope and drops onto the deck, advancing on him, feeling as if her steps might scorch the boards. She hopes they do. She'd like to burn him alive.

Where is Jordan? If that's not Jordan—

Inej knows the language of pain, and if her daughter is dead, she will make these men fluent speakers.

Jesper sent her some throwing stars like Dunyasha's, and this man doesn't have her skill for dodging, so she manages to stick him with a few, but those small wounds won't decide the match—especially with pain still pulsing from her side.

He has a sword, but Inej has a knife, and practice, and a mother's fury. The scream of steel on steel exhilarates her so fully that she almost forgets to control her breathing. She is vicious. She is justice. She is close to the man now, close enough to see fear in the whites of his eyes,

close enough that he can see her smiling a manic smile, showing all her teeth. She doesn't know if she's ever felt like this. She loves it more than she should.

"I see why Brekker likes you," he says, trying and failing to drive her back with an outward strike that she ducks and parries.

Inej slashes his bicep. To his credit, he doesn't falter—much. "We're two of a kind, just a couple of monsters. But if you're challenging the ghosts and demons, you must really fear your sins."

His blade catches her forearm, just barely, but it's a deep slice and it bleeds. Luckily it's her left, so it won't affect her grip. Dueling isn't Inej's style, and yet she's managing to stick and slice him well enough. They've fought their way down the deck with her advancing, and if she can disarm him, she's strong enough to flip him over himself and get him on the ground —

She is not one to fantasize about blood spilling over her hands, life draining from a man's eyes while she watches. Maybe Kaz does that. But she does want to see this man hurt. She wants him to cry. She wants him to plead. And she wants him to remember.

She watches him move, start toward her weakened left, but she's faster; she lunges opposite, slips around his back, and gets an arm across his throat, pinning him to the rail.

Her knife is at his heart. She fancies that she can hear it shuddering. She wonders if she will hear it stop. "Perhaps you've heard that the sea is fickle," she whispers at his shoulder. Her breath stirs the little hairs that curl behind his ear. "That it does not forgive, that it is cruel. But the truth is that it's merciful compared to me."

He does not plead. Inej wonders just how much he must have lost, and finds that she wishes it were more.

You always have more to lose. She doesn't know if the thought comes before or after the *Wraith* explodes, but she'll remember it as coming after. It's more poetic that way.

Inej

Chapter Summary

The family finds each other in the harbor.

Chapter Notes

I am very bad and forgot to respond to comments this week, so I'll have to make up for it with some extra-good shout-outs~

Andhehe, yeah, some people actually figured out what happened to the letter really early on. I was pleasantly surprised.

wicked333, I love when I get to write scary Inej. Like Kaz says, she is a dangerous girl.

andyoudoctor, I love all of the connections you made in this comment—to the books, to other parts of this fic; I'm living for the analysis.

Book_Junkie007, I really like your take on their public relationship, because I do think that the fandom often overestimates how much people really see Inej as Kaz's second.

toovrede, it'll come back again soon…

KiwisAndTea, reunion and comeuppance are here as you requested :D

LeoLou, I particularly appreciate this commend because I'm less confident in my ability to write action, so thank you :)

alltheworldisinmyhead, I'm going to be honest, I'm a little afraid for your health, but not enough so to lower the stakes ;)

Everything is cold chaos. Inej vaguely remembers the shock of the explosion, of the *Hawk* rocking and tilting and her being thrown over the rail. Her knife is no longer in her hand. She's not sure where the *Hawk's* captain went.

She can't make herself think of him by name, even though she knows what it is.

The saltwater stings the slice on her forearm terribly, and she can barely open her eyes enough to find the surface. Her lungs burning, she kicks upwards until her head breaks out of the water into blessed air that suddenly seems frigid. She clears the water from her eyes as

well as she can, gasping, and looks around. It looks like most everyone else managed to stay on the *Hawk,* except for a dark shape thrashing weakly in the waves near her.

A red trail follows him, smeared in the dark water. Inej is reminded of the sharks.

Focus. She's treading water all right for now, but her breath still hasn't recovered from the gunshot, and if she goes under for too long it'll give out. These aren't exactly ideal circumstances for making the swim back to the docks, but it's the best chance that she has.

She imagines doing this, nine years old, pretending that the only thing you have to cling to isn't who he is. Suddenly she can't remember why she was so angry with Kaz.

She turns her body forward and starts to swim, pretending that she's not in quite so much danger but swimming as if she is. Pretending that her ship isn't gone, who knows how many dead, Jordan still missing, or—

Stop thinking. Just swim.

Every time her left arm submerges, a fiery line of pain ignites, but it's a small price to pay for keeping her head above water. If she can just get back to the city, Kaz will be there, and they can make a new plan, or…

What if they can't make a new plan? What if Jordan is just gone?

Then he will hold her like he did when she fell into his arms, four years disappearing between them. She tells herself this and finds that she believes it.

Swim, Inej, swim.

Cold water and burning bricks aren't so different when it comes down to it. She might not like the future that she sees, but nonetheless it's waiting above. Her life's work began in that incinerator, and if it has to end here, she trusts that there is something beyond. Every time her head rises above the waves, she murmurs the names of her Saints.

Swim, Inej, swim.

Her limbs are sore and heavy, but she can see the docks. She can make it as far as that. As long as she can see—

Another dark shape in the water. *Shark* , her mind screams in a panic. But the shape is wrong. And then a dark head breaks the surface. And she doesn't understand, not at all, but she knows.

She swims faster.

He's looking somewhere beyond her, face and eyes white, unseeing. Inej is half sure that he would swim right past her if she doesn't stop him, but she isn't sure how to do that without touching him, which she knows is only going to make things worse. Why didn't *he* know that? Why didn't his monstrous brain manage to conceive that he wasn't going to be able to

save her if he couldn't even get close? Maybe that wasn't his intention, but why else leap into the harbor, as he must have…

"Kaz," she says insistently, bobbing and treading water in front of him, her voice hoarse and raw. He falters, stops, starts to sink, and then claws his way back to the surface, barely keeping himself upright. His breathing is all wrong.

"You need to go back," Inej says. "We need to go back."

Slowly, his gaze turns to her and latches onto her face, but instead of comfort or clarity, open horror shatters his expression. He shakes his head, bobs back and forth in the churning waves. Inej can only imagine what he thinks he sees. But she can't stay like this for much longer. Her body is screaming to rest, to give up, to let the current carry her where it will.

But she can't help him. She can't save him. She can't even get near him.

Inej kicks closer to him and squirms out of the borrowed vest, making her bruised side ache, craning her head back to keep breathing. She presses one end of the vest into his hand; he still has his gloves on, but they're soaked through. He flinches away from her, but his fist closes around the fabric, which is all that Inej wanted.

Holding tight to her end, she turns onto her back and starts kicking towards the docks, keeping her eyes on Kaz. He seems at least stirred into motion enough to move and not just be dragged along, perhaps not even realizing that he's grasping the other hem of the vest. Inej can't tell if he's looking at her or past her.

"Why?" she says as she kicks with energy she doesn't have, frustration leaking into her words. "Why wouldn't you just stay where I told you? Why finally decide to care in the worst way, Kaz?"

He meets her eyes, and she could almost believe he's perfectly lucid, but for his words. "I lost you."

"You didn't," Inej insists. Everything in her wants to pull him to her. "I'm here."

"I'm here," he says, and even though he's repeating her words, it means something different.

Inej looks back over her shoulder and realizes that they're almost there, but the thought is almost immediately eclipsed by the sight of the little figure standing on the dock. Inej's heart leaps into her throat. She almost stops, right there, forgets everything but that little shape that she could outline in her dreams. The only reason she keeps moving is because everything in her needs to be there, now, yesterday, a week ago.

Inej turns forward and crosses the last distance, still listening for the sounds of Kaz following. Jordan is dirty, scraped, disheveled…wet? But whole and alive, and for now that is all Inej cares.

Jordan is also holding Kaz's cane. She drops to her knees and lowers the head of it down towards the water, her face open and alight. "Mama!"

Inej's vision is blurred, and it takes her a moment to realize that it's with tears and not saltwater. She has to let go of the soaked vest to get her hands up on the end of the dock. "I can get up, I don't need it, *meja* ," she says, half sobbing, suddenly full of the strength to pull herself up onto the boards. Jordan puts Kaz's cane aside and barrels into her arms, bursting into tears.

Inej buries her face in Jordan's wet hair, stroking it over and over, murmuring in half-incoherent Suli and Kerch. She is safe. Jordan is safe and here and alive, and she is so brave, and Inej is so proud. Her heart is full to overflowing.

"I was brave, mama," says Jordan, hiccuping between tears in the way that small children do. "I was a good pirate."

"You are so brave, *meja,* but you don't need to be brave anymore," Inej whispers, giving her daughter a squeeze to reassure herself as much as Jordan. "I'm here."

Distantly, she recognizes the sound of Kaz joining them, pulling himself onto the boards. She lifts her head up and looks over Jordan at him, on his hands and knees, shivering with what might be cold or panic. Inej is still helpless, but she's helpless with Jordan in her arms, and she can't make herself afraid in the same way anymore. "Kaz?"

He looks up at her, and his gaze is clear, his face flushed with cold. He gathers up his coat and walking stick from the boards and stands unsteadily. Inej waits.

"Is the bastard dead?" His voice is quiet, his face half-shadowed.

Inej kisses the top of Jordan's head. The breeze, so much colder now that she's soaked through, nips at her skin. She thinks of the blur of the explosion, of being thrown forward, her knife sinking deep—of the dark head in the water, trailing a red stain. She looks out into the harbor at the burning wreckage, sure to incur the wrath of the Council if not the Tides themselves. Nothing alive approaches from it.

Felix Pieterse should have been dead. Well, he is now.

"He is."

"Good." Kaz starts to move past them. Inej will let him go. It's not worth making him stay with them if he has more important places to be, not now that her daughter is back and safe.

"Stay," says Jordan, pushing Inej's arm down to look up at Kaz. She scrubs some tears from her little face. "Please, da? Or can we go with you?"

Kaz looks down at Jordan, his coat still draped over his arm, his expression inscrutable. It's as silent as a prayer. There is no ceremony in it when he turns back to them; when he puts his coat over Inej's shoulders; when he sits. When he moves closer.

Inej dares to relax into him, to let their arms press together, a barrier of wool between. Kaz shudders, but he doesn't move away. She hears him take a steadying breath that then settles.

"Can we still go with you?" Jordan says sleepily.

The *Hawk* is turning back to shore. Inej whispers a prayer of thanks that her crew was on it.

“Your mother is hurt,” says Kaz. “So yes. But I expect she’ll want to wait for her crew.”

Inej looks at him in surprise. How had he known? “Where would we go? I’d just assumed…” What had she assumed? Jesper and Wylan didn’t even know she was back. It certainly wasn’t ideal to spring herself on them, even though they’d likely welcome her in.

“Wherever you want,” says Kaz. “Wherever you need.” The stubbornness in his face is old and familiar—the expression he wears when he tells you that *yes,* he’s calling on you to do the impossible again and *yes,* he believes you can, it’s not like he’s just asking to make you feel better.

She is stuck in the city now, isn’t she? She’s looking right at the sinking wreckage of the rest of her life. And yet, from this vantage point, she can look the future in the face. She’d chosen to believe that Kaz would hold her steady in the *after,* and here he is, doing just that. It’s a strange feeling, the thought that she might not have to do everything alone.

She thinks of his white face and dark eyes in the harbor. *I’m here.*

“I’m here.” As if he knows, he says it again.

Inej/Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej retrieves and reads the letter.

Chapter Notes

The comments on the last chapter were mostly screaming and crying, which I can appreciate, although they do make for some interesting shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, please know that I glory in your pathetic screeches.

khaki83101, I can feel the screaming on a deep level and also sincerely appreciate it.

the_purple_duck, your incoherence gives me life, thank you.

andyoudoctor, wanna talk about parallels to crooked kingdom? just wait until you see THIS chapter.

KiwisAndTea, yes, they'll be staying for a while; they need time to rebuild in every sense of the word.

thephonyqueenofengland, after the initial shock, the reunion certainly won't be perfect, but they will love each other through it <3

Cherr1es_04, *pats your back gently and offers you this chapter, which might just make it worse*

Andhehe, aren't we all, on some level, always screaming and crying?

wicked333, yes, I know I made you wait for the reunion but it sounds like it was worth it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej is the first to board the *Hawk* when it reaches them. Jordan is not leaving her side, which Inej is just as glad for, so they venture onboard together, hands clasped tight. Jordan is buried in the folds of Kaz's coat, the sleeve bunched up around her elbow just to allow her to hold Inej's hand.

Some of the members of her crew she'd brought with her are milling around on deck—she can only pray that the rest are accounted for. After assuring them that she and Jordan are all right—more or less—the first place that Inej goes is to the captain's cabin. She can't stop thinking about Felix's words.

Such pretty things he wrote about you.

It's probably foolish of her, but she has to know if he was bluffing—and if he wasn't, what exactly the letter said, and why, and how.

Jordan almost trips on the hem of the overlarge coat, her solution to which is to bundle the extra folds into her free arm and hold them, crumpled, against her chest. Inej somehow doubts that Kaz will mind.

The door is locked when they get to it. Inej frowns slightly. It's a minor obstacle, and probably one she should have thought—"Jordan, what are you doing?"

Jordan has fished a shining needle out of the coat's pocket and inserted it into the lock. She sticks her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she fiddles with the lock, then beams when it gives and the door swings open. Inej just looks at her for a moment before sighing heavily and following her inside.

While Jordan pokes around in drawers and under the cot, Inej goes straight to the desk. There isn't much on it—just some maps—but there is a slender drawer sunk into its front. It's locked as well, but while she's no Kaz, Inej has enough pride not to ask a nine-year-old for help. It takes her a moment, but then the drawer slides open easily enough under her silent touch.

It's empty. Apparently.

The bottom of the drawer, however, is made of some kind of flimsy, green material. Inej feels around the edges until her nail slips under in the corner. As she'd expected, the false bottom peels away, and there's an envelope beneath it—an envelope closed with a now-broken black wax seal.

As silently as the thief she is, Inej slips the letter out of the drawer and unfolds it, cursing her hands for how shaky and uncertain they've suddenly become. She lays it down on the desk, smoothing out the creases with a press of her hand.

"Captain."

Inej turns around much more sharply than she would've liked, slipping the letter into her vest. No one surprises the Wraith. That's her game.

At least it's just Specht, standing in the straightest salute she's ever seen from him. Inej's breath rushes from her lungs as something cold and heavy fills her chest like lead. "There's no need for all that," she says. "What is it?"

He relaxes—droops, more properly, as if the strings holding him up have been cut. “Fionn.” The name comes out as a strangled whisper, but to Inej, it’s as loud as a cannon blast.

No.

She’s silent, of course. She is the Wraith, after all, and she will do her grieving as invisibly as everything else.

“Of the five of us,” he goes on, his voice taut and trembling like a tightrope in the wind, “she was the only one on the *Wraith.* ”

Inej has lost friends since all the way back to her time with the Dregs. She’s even lost crew members before. But Fionn was one of the first to believe in her enough to join her cause. She’d been so like Nina. And she had done so much to raise Jordan.

Jordan.

Inej looks to her daughter, whose eyes are wide and watering. “Is that what blew up?” she says. “Did our ship—”

“Come here,” says Inej, crouching and putting her arms out to Jordan. Like many other times in this world, even when the waves are crashing over her head, she has to lift her daughter up to breathe. She clutches Jordan close to her, feels their hearts beat against each other through wet clothes. “It’s going to be okay. Kaz and I will figure out what to do next.” She’s almost surprised to find how much she believes that.

With one arm still around Jordan, she looks up at Specht, who’s still there. “Anything else?” Her voice sounds startlingly ragged.

“We captured one of the *Hawk’s* crew. Thought you’d want to talk to him.”

As a matter of fact, she would like that very much.

<><><>

Kaz comes into the cabin, and there is a man tied to a chair. He surveys the room and sees Jordan watching quite intently. Good. One must set an example, after all.

Parenting 101 with Kaz Brekker, acknowledged expert, he thinks drily.

He understands, to a degree, the somber mood on board; the practical part of him that’s impatient with it is quickly silenced by the part of him that doesn’t particularly feel like getting yelled at by Inej again.

Also, right now, he has an example in living color of what she’s like when she’s angry.

“—was a one-time job,” the man is saying. He looks like one of those creatures that’s been preserved in a jar for study, except considerably more afraid. “To get rid of the little bug that was biting us. And we did, didn’t we?”

“Oh, yes, I’d say you vanquished the bug that killed your crew and tied you up on your own ship,” Inej says, her voice bitingly sweet. “And what do you think the bug is going to do next?”

He shifts a shoulder. “Have Dirtyhands beat me up? Ask me more questions? I’m not giving names or—”

Kaz notes the implication that he works for Inej, but doesn’t correct it. At this point, it’s not exactly wrong.

“Silly boy,” says Inej, and there’s a note in her voice, rich and smooth, that makes something deep in Kaz’s stomach buzz with heat. He shutters the feeling, saves it for later. “You don’t have anything else that I want. If you want to survive, you can no longer bargain. You’ll have to beg.”

Kaz would go to his aching knees for a kind word from her, were she not so good as to give them out freely.

The beast, however, spits at her. Kaz is about to snap his jaw off and make a collar out of it.

Instead, it’s Inej who moves. She kicks the chair out from under him, in the same motion driving her knee into his groin, and slams him to the floor, a fist in his hair to bash his skull against the boards. She steps back and plants a foot on his head, pushing it to the ground.

Her fighting style has always been elegant, fluid, even when it was quick. Kaz was always the one to be harsh and brutal and cruel. This is a new weapon in her hands, and he *likes* it. He likes it more than he should, like everything else about her.

Inej rests a forearm on her knee and bends over the fallen form. “Actually, I do have a question for you. Did you touch my daughter?”

Silence. Kaz can hear the man fighting down a groan.

“He did,” says Jordan from the corner. “He hit me.”

Inej tilts her head like a predator focusing its gaze. “Which hand?”

The man grunts. “Why would I remember—”

“Right,” says Jordan, taking a step closer. She looks down at him, careful, observing, and gestures to illustrate her words. “He tried again. But I pulled a nail out of the floor and he hit that instead. *Tchk.* ” She mimes what Kaz assumes is the nail going through his hand. “That’s why he was hiding on his ship. He could only fight with his bad hand after that.”

Kaz clenches his jaw tight, but it’s not enough to stop the slightest hint of a smile from breaking through.

Inej, meanwhile, lifts her foot from the man’s head and crouches, then draws his right hand out from beneath his crumpled form. There’s still a small, round, fresh wound on the back of it.

Inej looks over it for a moment. Kaz sees her grip loosen and wonders if she'll walk away. He can't force her to be a monster today; maybe it's better if she never becomes like him, after all.

But then the man is screaming, and there's a knife in his hand, sunk clean through into the boards.

Inej goes to talk to Jordan, and Kaz prepares himself to slip out. Before he goes, though, he looks back over his shoulder. "Those annoying little spiders do have a nasty bite, now, don't they?"

<><><>

Inej knows where they're going well before they get there. She hasn't just been watching Kaz walk, heavily favoring his right, probably made worse by the cold and the swim. She's been observing her surroundings; it may have been years, but she still knows the city around the Geldrenner hotel.

She supposes that Kaz can afford it, the way that things are going with the Dregs and his enterprises. If only the desperate teenagers that they were, with no resources and a city against them, had known that one day they'd be able to afford an indefinite stay. Or, at least, that Kaz would. He was the one who'd cared for *kruge,* back then.

At least one of us got what they wanted.

When they get inside, they get some odd looks from the few patrons mingling in the lobby; the Geldrenner is frequented by the city's elite, and here they are looking like a family of drowned canal rats. She can't bring herself to care.

The hotel has recently installed a new feature, it seems, a metal box that's raised by some kind of pulley, for the use of guests who'd rather not take the stairs. Inej pretends to be curious about it, for Kaz's sake. She senses that he knows her game, but at least he doesn't argue.

The hallway is long and empty. Doors follow doors that follow more identical doors. They check in to room 306, and Kaz hands Inej the key. It's strange to see him use one.

Jordan runs inside and flops on one of the beds. Inej doesn't care enough to tell her to put a towel down first. She'll have to get some of their clothes from Jesper and Wylan's, but none of Jordan's will fit anymore…

She sees Kaz walk into her field of vision and realizes that she's stopped just inside the door, staring dumbly into the clean, plush, practically empty room that's just like a thousand others. Jordan says she's hungry.

"I'll go downstairs," says Kaz. "The room arrangements still need settling."

Of course he'd find a reason. Anything but that he cares. Inej slowly goes to the end of the bed that Jordan isn't on and sits on it. It gives beneath her, soft and springy.

Maybe the weight of what she's lost will settle onto her eventually. If she had her say, she would simply vanish, join the thousand ghosts hanging over this city until the pain was gone; but now she has something tethering her to this world. Now she has Jordan, needing her there, whole and solid. If she could just make herself feel, she'd be afraid.

She goes to adjust her vest and feels the envelope that she tucked into it. Numbly, she reaches inside and extracts it, watching her hand draw out the parchment as if it's not attached to her body.

And…she reads.

The words are desperate. Hollow. And horribly, painfully honest. She doesn't like that she can imagine Kaz, his eyes bloodshot, hunched over his desk, scribbling in a fervor and getting ink all over the place. What she can't imagine is him saying the things that this letter says to her.

My piety and my punishment. My wisdom. My wraith, my keeper of secrets, the secret of my heart. My saint, my salvation, my destruction, my rebirth. It's all so dramatic. So very Kaz, in that way. But she looks down at these words in his handwriting and can't reconcile the two; they are things that should not exist together, not so close, not like this. Maybe that applies to her and Kaz as well.

My darling, my love. Normal things that normal people call their normal lovers. Sweet nothings, whispered between kisses. She can't hear them in his voice. They don't fit.

Let me kiss the salt off your lips. Let me kiss the fear from your mind. Let me kiss you until it kills me. Kill me, and it would be all right. Let me have you. Let me tell you the hundred things I want to do to you. Do what you will with me.

The old wanting blossoms inside of her, an unsteady pulse, ready to careen and fall any second. It's a swoop in her stomach, a tightening of her chest, the feeling of leaping from a trapeze and trusting that there will be another there to catch. It is all far too dangerous—this time, she knows she'll fall.

Jordan's curious, sleepy voice rises beside her. "Mama? Are you okay?"

Inej begins to answer, but she's interrupted by another voice from the door. "She's not. I found some—"

His sentence jerks to a halt and then trickles away to nothing. Inej knows why.

"They're sending up room service," Kaz says flatly.

Inej faces Kaz where he stands in the doorway, backlit. The letter lies in her hands. It feels incriminating.

"That's how he knew." Kaz speaks like he's walking on nails, like if he doesn't hold every word on the tightest string, it will all collapse. He might have to be honest, Inej thinks bitterly. But what lies in her hands is what happens when he's honest.

“Felix Pieterse,” she says, her voice coming out terribly quiet. The voice of the Wraith. “Did you suspect?”

Kaz takes a slow step towards her, the click of his cane muffled by the carpeted floor. He’s still wet. They both are, Inej supposes. He has a roll of bandages dangling limply from his free hand.

“It made sense,” he says, still ever so careful. “He didn’t need to be a slaver to create a coalition that hates you, in order to get at me. Inej, your arm—You need—”

“What I need is answers.” Inej rises and walks, not sure of where she’s going, but she finds herself facing the bathroom door. She holds the letter so tightly it might tear. It feels like evidence, but she’s no longer sure which one of them it accuses. “Where was this? Where was any of this when…when—ever?”

“Properly locked away where it belonged. Some of it blessedly unthought of.” She looks back; Kaz’s collar isn’t quite high enough to hide the flush that creeps up his neck. He takes another stilted step towards her. Over his shoulder, Jordan is asleep. “Now, will you *please* —”

“Look who’s learned manners,” Inej muses. She fiddles with her earring and only then realizes which one it is.

The pearl. The one he gave her.

The memory of an almost-kiss, of the ghost of his touch, washes over her so powerfully that she can hardly breathe. Could she imagine that man pouring his heart out on paper? Maybe this one just isn’t so different.

She takes the chance and looks into his eyes. They are as bitter-coffee brown as ever, impossibly deep. All she can think of is his words, words she only had to read once to memorize: *Ever seen a wretched husk of a man land hard for you and never want to get up? You have. You’ve seen it every time you meet my eyes.*

Inej’s breath leaves her entirely. She sees it now.

Slowly, she opens the bathroom door and steps inside. It’s as if the years have disintegrated—the same high windows, the same white and gold tiles. This probably isn’t the same room, and the light is much deeper gold in the almost-twilight, but it hardly matters.

She lifts herself onto the counter. Kaz hesitates before following her in, standing a foot away, that *look* in his eyes that has somehow always been there—but now Inej can’t look away. How did she never notice that before? How had she managed to will away what she knew was there?

“I can help you,” says Kaz. Nothing really changes, does it?

She was right. She’d leapt with nothing to catch her. But this will be a glorious fall.

Inej rolls up her sleeve to look at the cut. It's stopped bleeding, helped by the saltwater. She dries her arm with a towel that hangs by the sink, then rests her forearm on her thigh, palm up.

Kaz steps closer to her. He's standing between her thighs, golden light on his hair. It's been almost ten years, and so very little has changed. He left his cane behind, and now he undoes the clasps on his gloves and lays them aside on the counter. Inej sets the letter down on top of them, covering his armor with what happens when it's gone. She offers him the towel.

Kaz dries his hands. The silence is reverent as she lifts her arm to allow him to wind the bandage around it. "Did you think that letter was why I stopped writing?" Inej asks at length, watching the gentleness of his motions—just the slightest brushes against her, unavoidable.

"It was what I expected," he replies, quickly and curtly, looking down at his work. Inej senses the effort behind making it sound businesslike. She knows him well enough to know better.

"I was angry," she confesses. "I thought—I wrote that I might send Jordan back, and you never answered, so I…" She'd thought the worst of him. *I'll take her home* , he'd written. *Show her the apple trees and the creek and buy her so many sweets at the bakery that you'll scowl at me in that glorious way you do.*

"And you never answered *me* ," Kaz says with a wry twist of a smile.

"We're supposed to be smarter than this, aren't we?" Inej asks. She watches as Kaz finishes with the bandage, the process so careful that it barely hurts.

"I'm a fool when it comes to you." Kaz's voice is so soft, all rasp and no tone, that she barely hears him. But he looks up and meets her eyes again, and then there is no doubt.

You've seen it every time you meet my eyes.

"You leapt into the harbor to save me," Inej says. Before he can interject, she continues, "You said that you would come for me. And you did." She touches her earring as she did before. "You were wrong, you know."

"Impossible," says Kaz, arching an eyebrow. "I never am."

"My Saints are watching over me," says Inej, bending ever so slightly closer. "And that's why they gave me you." Their breaths are mingling as she speaks. Kaz's hitches softly, sharply. He has a tiny, white scar at the corner of his lip.

His dark, liquid gaze darts from Inej's eyes to her lips and back again. Something deep inside of her ignites, and she grips the edge of the counter hard. Every nerve in her body seems to stand upright, to strain towards him. He gives a dry chuckle, and she watches his crooked, clever mouth as he speaks. "When I said there was no one like you, I was referring to your skills, but you know as well as I that no one else would consider me a blessing."

Inej lifts a hand, clutching the towel she used before, and wipes away a rivulet that's rolling down his temple from his wet hair, lingering over the closest thing she can have to a touch.

He shivers and leans into it. “You don’t have to understand,” she says.

He doesn’t speak, and she can accept that. There aren’t always words for times like this. But the things that people do instead of speaking are forbidden to them. The only words Inej can find, funnily enough, are his.

“I can’t love you,” she says, “but I can’t do anything else.”

Chapter End Notes

I post chapter updates and other fun stuff on Instagram @fairytales_of_forever :)
Also, it has been scientifically proven that comments make me write faster.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan has a bad dream, a yummy breakfast, and some hot chocolate.

Chapter Notes

hardly_a_ghost, I hope the screaming continues with this chapter as well XD

katasstrophey, this comment is so lovely! Thank you!

the_purple_duck, it's not magic, just ADHD hyperfixation juice.

toovrede, fear not, I'm crying with you.

KiwisAndTea, yeeees...it's totally going to be happy...yep...mhm...

Andhehe, It's a good time for them and for the story to reflect on how far they've come, I think.

thephonyqueenofengland, I love your comments on how much has changed even as we seem to find them back where they were. Maturity can do a lot for development and healing.

LeoLou, YOU'RE WELCOME! And thank you for this amazing comment, especially for mentioning that you liked the parallels <3

schemingface, I think I've mentioned that binge readers are my favorite, but just in case, THEY ARE MY FAVORITE. Love ya <3

Jmbliss, I had to bring that letter back eventually ;)

Princess_Zivaleh, seems I've done my job!

andyoudoctor, hope is something that they desperately need more of, so I wanted to give them that—if nothing else.

wicked333, thank you!! More is here!!

LolaBleu, this comment makes me so happy, because it describes exactly what I wanted to chapter to be <3

that1annoyingbitch, I'm proud to have made you speechless :D

Nekobasu1, I thought they deserved a moment to breathe <3

marie, I would apologize for the emotional damage, but, well, think of how boring it would be if I didn't! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan dreams about the bad men.

Sometimes, when she dreams, she knows she's dreaming. This isn't like that. This is like what Inej has said it's like to Forget—that's what they call it when Inej gets all quiet sometimes and doesn't remember where she is. Maybe getting taken on a ship by bad men always makes you Forget, and now Jordan will too.

But she is not thinking any of this now. She is on the ship, in the dark hold, with their hot breath beating down on her like the sunlight that she hasn't seen in days. Their voices are scratchy, but not like Kaz's.

"Dirtyhands' kid, huh? Scrawny little thing."

"You think he's really working with the Wraith?"

"Working is one word. I've heard things about what she did before she came for our business. Bet Dirtyhands is rich enough to pay for her."

"I'll bet this one grows up nice." One of them grabs her face and pulls it to look at him. It hurts. Jordan wants to close her eyes. "Flat as a pan, but she's got a pretty face."

The other one spits on the floor. "Too young for my taste. Give her a few years."

The one holding Jordan laughs, loud and ugly. He throws her back down, and she tries not to cry out when she hits the floor. She is a pirate, and pirates don't cry.

"She won't make it that long," he says. Jordan understands that well enough. The dark is swallowing her, like maybe the ship is sinking, and there's nothing but black water. And maybe she isn't a pirate after all, because she feels a hot tear roll down her face.

She's still crying when she wakes up, and at first, it's—she's crying in the dark, just like she was before, and is the breathing nearby one of those men? But it doesn't sound like them. It sounds like…

Jordan scrambles out of bed, crying harder for some reason, and crawls into the other bed, next to Inej. Inej is facing away from her, and she goes tense when Jordan puts an arm over her side to hug her. Quickly, Jordan pulls away, trying to hush her crying to little, gasping hiccups.

Inej turns over, and her eyes are wide and scared for a second before she sees Jordan by the light through the filmy curtains. “I’m sorry, *meja,* ” she says, her voice scratchy with sleep. She puts an arm around Jordan and pulls her close. “What’s wrong?”

Jordan wonders if her mama Forgot, and if she did, why. “Bad dream,” she says, burrowing into the fluffy covers. These hotel beds are so comfy and soft; she doesn’t ever want to sleep in a hammock again.

Inej smells nice, safe and clean. She strokes Jordan’s hair. “It’s gone now,” she whispers, her voice wrapping around Jordan as warmly as the blanket. “You’re safe with me.” Jordan tries to believe that, to forget the men’s voices, their rough hands throwing her around. She squeezes Inej back, tighter, making it a game to see who can give the strongest hug. Between the two of them, maybe they can keep her safe.

She thinks she remembers having a bad dream before, when they were in the city last time. Her memory is as hazy as the silvery light from the window, but she thinks, like the light gets clearer where it pools on the floor, that she remembers Kaz being there. Maybe that’s when he started teaching her to pick locks.

“Why isn’t Kaz here?” she asks, soft and sleepy. Inej goes all tense again, and now Jordan is afraid she said something bad. Sometimes Inej likes to talk about Kaz, and sometimes she doesn’t. It doesn’t make any sense.

“He doesn’t live here. He lives somewhere else.” Inej pushes some pieces of Jordan’s hair back off of her face, still wet from the bath she took before going to sleep. “We’ll see him again soon.” But Jordan has known how to pretend since she was very little, and pretending isn’t so different from lying, and people seem to think it isn’t *really* lying when they just don’t say the whole truth, but Jordan knows better. She knows when they’re doing it. “Soon” could be anything. It could be too late. She starts crying again and tries to hide her face in the blankets.

Inej sits partway up and lifts up Jordan’s face with a hand on her cheek. “What’s wrong?” She sounds almost scared. Jordan doesn’t like that. Inej isn’t supposed to be scared of anything. Not when she could kill the same man that Jordan couldn’t even stop from hitting her.

Jordan tries to hide her face again, but Inej brushes away a tear with a sweep of her thumb. “Nothing,” Jordan says, because they might as well both be lying.

Inej is quiet. It’s a bad quiet. Jordan can’t see her face, but she feels her lie back down. She rests her head on Inej’s chest, thin and not very soft but still safe and solid. Perfect as far as Jordan is concerned.

“Stay here,” Inej says quietly, combing her fingers through Jordan’s hair. “No one can hurt you while I’m here.”

She’s pretending again, Jordan thinks. But Jordan doesn’t argue, because she wants to pretend that, too.

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In the morning, breakfast is brought up on trays—cheese and fruits and bread shiny with butter, plus pastries dusted with sugar. Jordan pounces on the little chocolatey ones and gets powdered sugar on the sheets, but she doesn't think it matters since they're both white. Inej doesn't seem to mind.

"I couldn't forget your sweet tooth," she says, cross-legged on the bed and nibbling on an orange. She smiles, that pretty smile that Jordan loves. "You're just like your—" The smile drops, but not into sadness as much as surprise, where Inej blinks at herself and gives Jordan a funny look. Not a bad one, though. "You're just like your father. Save one for him."

Jordan pouts, but she listens. She can't really imagine Kaz liking sweets, though. Would he get powdered sugar all over his gloves? His black coat? The idea of it makes her giggle, of her serious da stuffing his face with pastries. Maybe Inej is thinking about it too, because she laughs, just a little. That makes Jordan giggle even more until she flops over backwards, still laughing, and Inej puts another pastry in her mouth.

"That'll make you be quiet," she teases.

Jordan tries to scowl, but as she'd figured out when trying to imagine Kaz, it's very hard to look angry with a puff pastry in your mouth.

After they eat, and Jordan reluctantly leaves a pastry for Kaz, Inej braids her hair.

"Tell him he has to come today," Jordan says seriously. "It'll get stale."

"Or you might just have to eat it," says Inej, and even she's behind her, Jordan can hear her smiling—that mischievous smile that's even better than the pretty, happy one. That smile means they're going to get into trouble together, which is the *best.*

Inej is just tying off Jordan's braid with a red ribbon when there's a knock on the door. Both Inej and Jordan startle, but then Inej puts Jordan's finished braid over her shoulder and rises to walk to the door. Jordan marvels at how quiet her footsteps are. She wants to learn to move like that.

Inej checks the door before opening it. Jordan watches her posture change and knows who's there.

Kaz steps into the room. He's leaning more on his walking stick than Jordan remembers. But his expression also looks…Jordan isn't sure. Not happier, exactly, but softer somehow. Or maybe just tired.

Jordan picks up the remaining pastry from the tray and slides off of the bed, bounding up to Kaz. She holds it out to him. "Inej made me save you one."

He gives her a long look before taking off his gloves, putting them in his coat pocket, and carefully picking the pastry up from her hand. Jordan gives him a look.

He raises his eyebrows. "Something else, Jordan?"

“You need to say thank you,” she insists. He doesn’t have to be nice, but he should at least have manners.

Kaz and Inej look at each other. Jordan looks at them. She isn’t sure what’s funny, but Inej is doing a bad job of not laughing.

“Thank you,” he says slowly.

Jordan, contented, hops back onto the bed, where her vest is laid out—now dry. Right now, she’s dressed in all-black, like Inej’s spy clothes, but the vest that she puts on and buttons up is dark red. It has a pocket on the inside where her knife used to go, and another one that she keeps the pocket watch in, which, luckily, is still working. The map from Alby is secreted away in a dresser drawer, wrinkled and smeared but, Jordan thinks, still legible. It just needs to stay there without Inej finding it.

Kaz and Inej are talking quietly by the door. Inej nods and comes over to get Jordan, who perks up. Are she and Kaz going on an adventure?

“Behave yourself for him,” says Inej, taking one of Jordan’s hands and helping her off the bed, even though she doesn’t need help. She looks over at Kaz, who is using the nearest curtain to dust powdered sugar off of his hands. “And you, behave yourself for her.”

“I’m a model citizen,” says Kaz. “As far as the *stadwatch* is concerned.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” says Inej, giving Jordan’s shoulders a little nudge towards the door.

“They don’t have anything on me yet, so in terms of technicalities, I’m afraid you’re wrong, dear Inej.” He tips his hat to her dramatically.

Jordan giggles and follows him out the door.

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Kaz doesn’t hold her hand as they walk around like Inej does, but it’s easy enough to trail him; people seem to move out of his way, leaving a Jordan-sized path behind him. Mostly, though, she doesn’t even use it, opting to scramble up a drainpipe or lamppost and scamper over the roofs, following the trail that he leaves in the morning crowd.

She almost loses him once when she stops to give some pastry crumbs to the crows, but a moment later, she spots his dark shape in the street and catches up. She doesn’t know the city well enough to know which districts they pass through, but it seems like a shorter way than it should be by the time Kaz seems to stop.

He’s stopped by a little cart under an awning, near a stone bridge that crosses the canal. Jordan slides down the awning and drops to the ground beside him, bending her knees to soften the impact.

The man behind the cart, gray-haired and smiling, looks down at her in surprise. “A friend of yours?”

“None of that, De Vos; you know I don’t have friends.” Kaz pulls a *kruge* note out of seemingly nowhere and puts it on top of the cart. “That said, make it two.”

“Two what?” says Jordan.

“Patience is the key to revenge, stakeouts, and everything else in life,” says Kaz, which is not even close to being an answer. Jordan pouts.

Mr. De Vos smiles at her as he stirs something in a cup. “Is she yours?”

“As much as a stray dog that follows me home and nips at my heels when I try to make it leave is mine,” Kaz replies, taking the two cups. He hands one to Jordan, and she catches the scent immediately.

“Hot chocolate?”

“Emphasis on *hot*, so don’t spill it,” says Mr. De Vos. “Whatever Mr. Brekker is to you, he actually paid for this, so let’s not waste that rare occurrence.”

“You slander me like that and I’ll stop paying,” says Kaz. He touches his cane to Jordan’s shoulders. “Now leave this old fool to his business.”

Jordan thinks she hears Mr. De Vos grumbling behind her, which makes her laugh. She follows Kaz to the bridge, where he leans against the rail, and she climbs up to sit on top of it, carefully balancing the hot chocolate.

Kaz takes a sip of his. “He’s been in this city as long as I have. You’d think he would have been scared off by now.”

Jordan kicks her legs, watching them swing above the water. “But there are lots of tourists. And they like hot chocolate.”

Kaz bumps his cup against hers. “Would you like to be the second person I’ve ever trusted with a secret of mine, Jordan?”

She kicks her legs faster and nods in excitement, blowing some steam off the top of the cup.

Kaz takes a long sip of his hot chocolate and gives her a look, one like Inej’s trouble smile. “I like it too.”

Chapter End Notes

credit to "Queen of Dragons" for using Forgetting to explain PTSD to a child :)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz buys a house. A great deal gets lost in translation.

Chapter Notes

Shout-outs~

whynotcherries, Kaz is actually a feral child at any age, and I love that for him <3

Andhehe, I hope you ended up getting that hot chocolate :)

schemingface, I thought you all deserved some sweet and domestic~

khaki83101, I'm glad you liked that part!

KiwisAndTea, yeahh, no matter how much character development he gets, Kaz isn't very good at saying nice things.

thephonyqueenofengland, kaz being kaz, he probably knows exactly how hard drapery is to clean and did it on purpose.

the_purple_duck, I love writing Jordan as much as you all seem to love reading her <3

andyoudoctor, the best relationships are the ones that can pick up right where they left off :)

Raphale, welcome! you joined just in time for things to stop being happy—uh I mean *keep* being happy! yep!

Adriennezzz, <33333

alltheworldisinmyhead, Jordan has her dad wrapped around her little finger and doesn't even know it ;)

LeoLou, I don't think he even realizes that he can be a good dad.

wicked333, I love their little bond <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The note is in Kaz's handwriting—a script she sees behind her eyes so often now, thinking of that letter—and it bears an address. A house on Zelverstraat.

Typical of Kaz, to keep a chokehold on information and trust her to show up. But to what—a heist? A stakeout? A fight? She almost doesn't go, fearing that it's forged. But the likelihood of such a thing getting past both her and Kaz is…

(It almost did, now, didn't it?)

But she arms herself to the teeth and tucks one of her smaller knives into Jordan's vest. She isn't bringing Jordan, but the Zelver and Geldin districts are relatively close, and she and Jordan have been getting reacquainted with Jesper and Wylan. She has to convince herself that she can trust them to watch her daughter for an hour or two.

They have guns and bombs and Schuyler locks, she comforts herself, *and nothing in recent memory connecting them to us.*

Still, she clings tight to her daughter's hand, right up until she passes it into Jesper's. The years haven't changed him much—a blessing of the Zemeni—but she notes that his motions are a little smoother, his expressions less frantic. It's like he's finally settled into his own skin.

Inej wishes she could say the same. She feels like she's been falling ever since she lost the *Wraith,* falling without even the cruel earth rising to catch her.

Maybe that's why she walks the streets to the address Kaz sent her instead of climbing. She can be someone without the name he gave her, someone besides who she was before. But there are so many "befores", now—the Wraith and the *Wraith* and the girl of the Ravkan fields, daughter and mother and pirate and spy. She is tired of losing herself.

She thinks of another identity, of another set of names she hasn't yet lost. *My piety and my punishment. My wisdom. My wraith, my keeper of secrets, the secret of my heart. My saint, my salvation, my destruction, my rebirth. My darling, my love.* But she doesn't want who she is to be wrapped up in what might well be drunken ramblings. Is that how he's always felt? She's almost certain he would never tell her.

The house that he sent her to has a blue front door and white lace curtains in the windows. It looks absurdly normal, and most importantly, empty.

There is a sign in the front that reads *For Sale* .

Inej goes very still. She'd been plotting her entrance—maybe up to the porch roof and in through a window? But now—

Is this what hitting the earth feels like? Or maybe it's what hitting a net feels like—a shameful kind of safety, one that she shouldn't need. She wonders if she'd rather she never landed.

The front door opens. Inej doesn't think before sinking a knife into the doorframe, right beside what turns out to be Kaz's head. He turns, slowly, and his nose almost touches the side of the blade. "Lucky I wasn't wearing my hat," he notes, arching an eyebrow.

Inej can almost hear Nina whispering in her ear— *Cut it a little closer, Inej, you might have fixed his haircut. Not like you could make it worse.* Aloud, she says, "You should know better than to surprise me."

"I thought you couldn't be surprised," says Kaz, tapping his cane against the porch. "Come in and have a look."

Inej gives him a *look,* but she follows, her silent footfalls up the stairs making up, somehow, for the click of his cane on the floorboards. She tracks his gait—she'll guess that his leg is still unhappy after their swim in the harbor, but it's not like he would tell her, nor do anything about it. She can easily imagine how it wouldn't have healed right in the first place.

The house doesn't have a grand foyer like the Van Eck mansion; instead, a smaller entrance hall opens into a sitting room of sorts, with a piano by the window and a neat little fireplace. Inej walks carefully into the room—despite knowing that it's unoccupied, she still hesitates to touch anything, or even venture too far inside. Old habits from her days as a thief, perhaps. Or just the fear that this can't be real, because if it is, it means…It means everything that she's lost.

She looks back over her shoulder at Kaz. He remains in the entryway, surveying the house with an odd expression, inscrutable and almost painfully restrained.

He's been here before. Kaz wouldn't just pick a house like this at random.

"What is this place?" she asks, standing by the piano to face him.

His hands flex on the head of his cane. "Thirteen Zelverstraat. Seems it was a foreclosure—always been rented, never sold, and no longer worth the bank's time."

Inej picks up an empty vase that sits on top of the piano, turning it over in her hands. They both know that's not all. But she'll walk him to the answer, and if he still won't tell her, she'll start asking real questions. "And why did you bring me here?"

The sun from the window flashes over his eyes, painting his face with patches of light. "You read the sign, Inej. Although I should say I've come to take it down."

Inej sets the vase down sharply and turns all the way to him, squaring her shoulders. *You square your shoulders before a fight.* "You bought it already?"

"I have my own purposes if you don't want it," says Kaz. His voice seems almost bound up in chains, as rough and cold as ever. Once, Inej would have wondered what happened to the man who bandaged her arm, who leapt into the harbor to save her. Now she doesn't bother. It's never gotten her anywhere.

“So Jordan and I would live here?” she asks slowly, wandering across the entrance hall to an end table that sits by the kitchen door. There’s a mirror hanging over it. She recognizes the face she sees in its reflection, but can’t tie her to anything. Who is she? What is she for? Does she matter to someone, or is she a problem to solve?

“There’s a private school in this district that she could attend before she’s old enough for the university,” Kaz continues, his footsteps announcing his presence as he walks up to stand behind her, though not close enough to be reflected in the mirror.

Inej wants to run back to him, to fall into his arms like she did when she first came back with Jordan missing, but she doesn’t think she could trust this version of him with her broken self. This is the Kaz whose plans account for every variable except the participants’ feelings. This the Kaz who knew that she could and just assumed that she wanted to. Maybe that’s her own fears talking, the desperation to believe that she can still stand on her own without a mission, but what’s facing her is that her mission would be raising Jordan. Being a mother.

It isn’t enough. Is that terrible? Is that the final marker of what’s twisted, crooked, wrong inside of her, of what’s broken and can’t be made whole? Does that make her terrible?

It feels like it. She’s put a knife in a man’s heart, but the secret feeling that raising her daughter would never be enough is somehow worse.

“We could also get married.”

Inej’s head jerks up sharply. Now she can see Kaz in the mirror, his face maddeningly impassive.

He seems to take her silence as, at the very least, a lack of disagreement. “I don’t believe you were ever made a Kerch citizen, and it would make living here much easier for you, especially since I expect you plan to operate mostly legally. Obviously, there are also financial benefits, better terms on loans, tax benefits, if you plan on paying them—”

It’s too much. It’s far too much in a way that’s not enough, and isn’t that just Kaz all over?

Inej turns around, looks him in the eyes. She tries to remind herself of what she saw in those eyes before, but right now she’s too angry to search for it. “You want to marry me,” she says slowly, “for *tax benefits?* ”

He shifts impatiently. “That was only one of the things that I listed. It would give you a whole host of—”

“You’re just searching for another way to make me a valuable asset, Kaz,” she says. “You know I won’t work for you as a spy anymore, so you’re solving the problem of my being stuck here in a way that suits you.”

Kaz’s lips thin; his shoulders draw up higher. She’s losing him and can’t bring herself to care. “Inej.”

Inej can't look at him anymore. She can't listen to him saying her name the same way that he's proclaimed her entire future without once asking her. She has spent enough time in one cage in this city, and she's not about to trade her wings for another.

And she is *tired.* Tired of chasing down and waiting for the side of him that might care for her. Tired of hoping and never knowing. Tired of not hearing the plan until it's too late to back out. Tired of losing, and losing, and losing; she is not about to lose herself. "Why not just buy me another ship, if you were going to spend the money anyway?"

Kaz looks away to the windows, a muscle straining in his neck. "I want—Well, to start, it's better for Jordan to have a stable life here—"

Inej was pacing the front room, but now she is stock-still. Her hand curls at her side—not into a fist, but the way it might around the hilt of a knife. "Don't tell me what's better for Jordan," she says, her voice so low that he will have to hunt it down to hear it. She wants him to work for every word and be disappointed when he finds them. "I raised her, Kaz. You didn't."

"*You didn't let me.* "

When Inej looks at him, he is almost shaking with the strain of holding his uptight position, staring straight ahead as if to burn through the wall. "You left," he says, his tone as tight as a high wire, "for four years. But fault me for wanting you to stay."

"It doesn't matter what you want, it's my choice, and you made it for me," says Inej, going to the door. She didn't want to have to make a life without him. Once she wouldn't have imagined that she could. But now, with so little left to lose, she might as well cut it all off, start over—vanish. Let the wind take her. Let her Saints lead her. "It's always business with you, never thinking that your plans involve humans and not assets. But remember this, Kaz: you're far from the only man who's tried to buy me."

Then she's out the blue front door, closing it behind her without a sound. The words will cut, she knows that; let him bleed a little. Maybe then he'll remember he's as human as everyone else.

She convinces herself of that, right up until she's on the steps of the Van Eck mansion and the tears start falling.

Chapter End Notes

The house that Kaz bought is a very specific house from canon, btw. If you can figure out which one, you'll get a cool prize that I have not decided on yet.
Also: please come yell at me in the comments. I will present you with a full psychoanalysis of this chapter. The fact that I couldn't also write Kaz's POV of this is very sad.

Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz plays the piano. Inej talks to Wylan.

Chapter Notes

tw: brief suicidal ideation (just skip the paragraph that starts "He feels like he's watching himself from a distance...")

Boy howdy, does this one have a lot of shout-outs~

JuicyJams, nope, but I hope that's made clear in this one!

Slightly, it has been so interesting to me to see the mixed opinions on who's in the right, which just proves to me how complicated the issue is.

khaki83101, annnnd we have a winner! Your prize is a big stack of waffles *pushes them towards you*

LeoLou, as I said to someone else, when broken people love each other, things can get messy. It's up to them to decide if it's worth it <3

hardly_a_ghost, well, fear not, this arc is going to be relatively short, and then you may dry your tears <3

schemingface, I give your essay an A+, and not just for saying nice things to me ;)

the_purple_duck, exactly, and I think that's what's providing us with this mixed thoughts on this chapter. I love the discourse!

LolaBleu, I'm glad you liked that line!!

andyoudoctor, did I steal something from your marvelous essay for this chapter? Maybe....

Andhehe, I can only hope that this chapter is as hype-worthy as you might dream ;)

wicked333, Kaz has never been much in the habit of putting his origin story behind him, has he? *Passes you your prize waffles*

toovrede, *hands you a tissue*

thephonyqueenofengland, they really aren't very good at just talking, are they? And you also get a stack of waffles for guessing the house!

KiwisAndTea, I agree that Jordan should get them to come to their senses.

WitheryDithery, fear not, this was the breaking point; unfortunately, I think things needed to come this far for them to shake their perceptions of each other, for her to see that Kaz isn't naturally cold and emotionally invincible.

kanej_13, and now that growth begins—I hope you enjoy it <3

Raphale, I agree, and part of that conflict is *should* he be better at explaining how he feels? Or is it enough for him to just feel it?

MR, *presents you with waffles, as well as an exasperated head-shake re: Kaz's gift choices*

JMBliss, here is the update, and I hope it was worth waiting for!

Princess_Zivaleh, yes, seems like everyone after this chapter either had a lot to say or nothing at all, XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's finally done it. He's lost her.

Thirteen Zelverstraat never ceases to take things from him. Thirteen is an unlucky number, after all. Kaz has never been much for fate or superstition, but maybe there's something to be said for that one.

He feels like he's watching himself from a distance, waiting to see what he will do. What else he can ruin. Will he find a fight to clear his head, stir up trouble that the Dregs don't need, maybe ruin an alliance? Will he punch a hole in the wall of this house that's as cursed and unwanted as he is? Will he find a mug of strong coffee and march on, or forget who he is in the back of some seedy bar? Will he drown himself in the canal, let the city finish its slow eating away at him? He'd always had the thought that that might be it, that one day when the fire of rage in him burned out he'd die at his own hand in order to do so undefeated.

In the end, he doesn't do any of that. It's a paradox: When the world has caved in, it's as if nothing has happened at all, because nothing is left to matter.

He walks to the piano, noting absently that his leg screams with every labored step. He almost laughs at himself. So much time pushing his body past its limits, and for what? For what, really? More *kruge,* more gold? Clearly Inej isn't interested in that. She isn't interested in being that.

In retrospect, there was only one thing he wanted. One thing that just walked out that blue front door.

He sinks onto the piano bench. It relieves the ache, a little. He peels off his gloves; what use are they? He'd gladly lose his mind now, gladly give himself over to the black tide, if it means leaving the present. Not so much difference between drifting and sinking, is there?

He thinks he should be angry. But angry at who? And for what? At Inej? What good can come of that? He can't get any pleasure from vengeance against her. He can't hurt her on purpose—despite how good he is at doing it when he's not trying.

He sets his hands on the keys. Wylan told him that they'd make fine pianist's hands, once. Little does Wylan know that once, before they learned to steal and kill and cheat at cards, they were. It drove Jordie mad that his little brother could play better than him.

Kaz doubts that he remembers the song, or at least not how to play it.

I do, says his brother's voice.

Figures that Jordie would be here. Still clinging to the dream of this house, maybe. Kaz wants to tell him to cut his losses, but neither of them has turned out to be good at that. So it's his brother's voice, not quite deepened to a man's, that sings to him as he picks out the chords.

The sky be your cradle, the sun be your mother…

"The moon be your night-light so you're not afraid…afraid…" The first chord sounds wrong, so Kaz tries another one. He plays a tentative, messy scale, humming the note until the pitch matches. It feels like picking a lock, like sliding the pick into the right channel and feeling it give.

His voice scrapes against his throat—he's never been much of a singer—so he half-hums, mumbling the words as he works through the song the first time over. "The stars will shine for you, clouds be still for you…the willow won't weep 'till it knows you're safe." The second time over, a little more at ease with the chords, he builds on them, working out a bass line that he doesn't know if he's remembering or inventing.

He'll have to play it for Jordan, if he ever sees her again.

Halfway through the second verse, he realizes that he no longer hears himself—only the piano. His throat is closed, no sound emerging. The last chord rolls through the empty house, and he slowly stops, staring ahead out the window.

He's…crying.

This is ridiculous , he tells himself, though he can't pinpoint exactly why. For more than a decade now, he's accounted for every variable to make himself practically invincible. He is what he always wanted to be—rich and triumphant and beholden to no one.

So why do tears dot the keys as he watches them fall? Why does he touch a hand to his face and feel them? It's pointless. It's absurd.

Without thinking much about it, he wipes the keys off with the cuff of his sleeve. They emit a weak cacophony in response to the pressure. He doesn't really want to go back to the Slat, where Jesper or Wylan could track him down and berate him; besides, his body seems to be defying him, and he suspects that he won't even be able to rise from the bench without ample aid from his cane.

Maybe he'll just stay here. Wait, though for what he isn't sure. Scheme, although what there is to gain he has yet to decide. Run a little experiment—if number thirteen is cursed, then it will keep taking from him. He might as well find out what he has left to lose.

He could go after her.

Some version of him, after all, could say things that would make her stay. He could call her a Saint, call her a creature of magic, an icon in stained glass.

But she isn't, is she? She's just a woman. One who is dangerous and beautiful and kind, but one who he was drawn to for being as broken as he is. Broken things have sharp edges; an easy thing to forget until one tries to put them together.

The worst part is that he loves her for it.

He loves her.

He loves Inej.

People over the years will mock and whisper that Dirtyhands is cold and cruel, that if you see him smile your death is inevitable, but they should see him now: laughing long and loud and like a maniac, his head tipped back the way that Jordie used to do. He laughs so hard that he's probably crying again. He laughs until it's hard to breathe.

He's in love with Inej, and irony is a damned thing. He puts his hands back to the piano and starts playing again, a dam broken in his memory—his da was a musical man, a lover of folk songs, and Kaz knows enough to last him for a good long while. He'll play the out-of-tune piano in this cursed old house until the world forces his hand, so free that it feels like flying.

Once, when he was seventeen and a touch too eager to warm his hands by the world on fire, he'd had the thought: *There's one person who would never use my weaknesses against me.* And she didn't use his weaknesses, did she?

She became one.

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Inej hates herself for dissolving into tears the moment Jesper opened the door. He'd immediately taken a step back, hesitantly reaching to help her, but it was Wylan who'd put an arm around her back, who'd told Jordan to stay in the kitchen for a minute, who'd guided her to the parlor that was tucked out of sight.

She hadn't wanted to stay there, for fear of facing Jordan, and now she's shut herself away upstairs like a coward. Look at her; first she can't stand the thought of staying put to raise her

daughter, and now she hides from her while Jordan's little fists pound on the door.

"Mama, *please,* what's wrong?"

Nothing. Nothing and everything. She was wrong, before; this is the fall. This is the landing. This is the knowledge that she miscalculated, that she leapt too far, the only the thing left in her head as she breaks against the ground.

Another voice. Wylan's gentle tenor. "I think she needs a minute to herself, all right? But it'll be okay."

Jordan continues to cry. Inej's body has been her survival and her weapon, and now she can't even get it to rise from the floor.

"Hey." Wylan's voice softens. "Look at me. It'll be okay, all right? I promise."

Inej pretends he's speaking to her.

"Go see Marya," he says. "She has some new paints to show you."

A moment's silence. "Okay," says Jordan. "Just one thing." Her voice gets clearer, as if she's speaking right against the door. "Mama? Will you be okay if I leave?"

Your heart can always break a little more. Inej goes up on her knees and rests her forehead against the door's surface. "Yes, *meja.* I won't be in here forever." Promising that to Jordan is the only way to ensure it, she thinks. It would be alarmingly easy just to stay here—with no mission awaiting her, no life outside.

Little footsteps patter hesitantly away, muffled but not silent. Wylan's voice rises again, as tentative as Inej remembers him at sixteen. "Can I come in?"

Rather than answering, Inej grabs the doorknob and uses it to pull herself to her feet, then, numbly, turns it. She moves away from the door to sit on the bed, but she hears Wylan come in behind her, shutting the door with a soft *click.*

"What happened?" he asks.

She looks somewhere past him at the wall, the corner of the door frame. "Kaz bought a house. For me and Jordan."

"Okay." Wylan sounds confused, and when she looks at him, it strikes her how young he looks, still—how open-faced, like he could still be not yet twenty.

She inhales and shuts her eyes. "He also asked me to marry him." He didn't propose, not really. It wasn't a proposal by any means. Except perhaps in the business sense.

"Oh." When she opens her eyes again, Wylan is blinking sky-blue eyes at her. "I would've thought you'd be happy about that."

“For the *financial benefits* ,” says Inej, unable to keep some bite from her voice. Her hands knot into fists around the blankets. “Ten years and nothing has changed. Men are still putting a price on me.”

“Okay, no.” Wylan takes several quick steps towards her, but stands in front of her instead of sitting at her side. “This is Kaz we’re talking about. Who we used to joke about loving money more than anything in the world. And he’s given up more of it for you than anything.”

“Because I was worth something to him,” Inej says bitterly. “A good investment.” It’s shocking how easily every old ache from years past resurfaces—everything that she now sees she must have overlooked in favor of her hopes that he could choose to be a better man.

Wylan frowns, and this time he does sit beside her. “You didn’t always believe that.”

“I didn’t want to.” And it’s true, isn’t it? Whatever evidence Kaz gave her to the contrary, she had always been the hopeful girl, clinging to whatever scraps of proof he gave her.

But what about that letter? What about the kiss? What about that look in his eyes?

Who knows, then? Maybe Kaz cares for her after all. But as long as he finds it shameful, as long as he refuses to admit it, she will not clutch at whatever slips through his iron grasp on his demeanor. She won’t settle when he is failing to hide that he cares for her, rather than trying to show it.

“You know, maybe there was some truth to it, when we used to call money his one true love. He’s Kerch. We worship commerce and hold trade sacred. Couldn’t that just be the language he chooses to tell you…” Wylan lifts a shoulder, and whether he doesn’t know what to say or how to say it doesn’t really make a difference to Inej.

“Tell me what? How he *feels* ?” Inej shakes her head slightly, her lips thinning into a line. “Kaz doesn’t—it doesn’t work like that, with him. Everything is a trade deal. Never something for nothing.”

Wylan leans forward into her line of vision. Inej doesn’t bother to look away, despite her urge to run, to climb, to disappear. “Then why buy your ship? Why step up for Jordan like this?”

A spark of frustration leaps to life in Inej’s chest. She pushes herself off of the bed and paces. “I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a reason. How often did he actually tell us what he was planning? Besides, the ship—why would he give me the means to leave, if—”

“Maybe he wants you to stay now,” Wylan says softly, one of his hands wrapped around the other.

Inej stops her pacing and almost scoffs, her gaze trailing aimlessly out the window. The sky is the usual Ketterdam gray, fog swirling low over the distant harbor. “You really believe that Kaz Brekker, the Bastard of the Barrel, wanted to marry me just—because?”

“I think he didn’t expect that you’d want to marry *him* just because,” says Wylan. “I know Kerch law at least as well as Kaz does. Those financial benefits go both ways. And there’d be

more in it for you."

A swirl of incredulous responses rises to Inej's mind, but something makes her hold her tongue. She doesn't—nobody could *hurt* Kaz Brekker. Physically, maybe, but while you might say something to make him angry, his feelings didn't get injured. That just wasn't the way that he operated. It isn't.

She can't imagine him being worried that she wouldn't accept his proposal. She can't imagine him taking such a personal risk, and for what? It just doesn't seem like the forever-confident man she knows, one who can even tip over into arrogance, one who accounts for every potential flaw in the plan.

(Maybe he did account for those flaws, and you don't like how he did it).

The pieces refuse to connect, but the thought won't leave her, and it makes something settle cold and heavy in her gut.

"I don't understand why you're defending him," she says, though with far less conviction than she might have a moment before.

"I'm not," says Wylan, rising from the bed. "I'm just not agreeing with you." He goes to the door, but before he leaves, he says, "Can I tell Jordan that you're all right to see her?"

Inej nods, but her mind is elsewhere. She'd thought that she already knew the cracks in Kaz's armor; she is his keeper of secrets, the one who helps to hide his vulnerabilities from the world. But if she *has* hurt him, then that means that she *can,* and that's—it scares her.

She just isn't sure why.

Chapter End Notes

pro tip: yelling at me in the comments is better than screaming into the void

Kaz/Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz reads, and sleeps for once. Inej goes to find him.

Chapter Notes

Lots of comments on this last one, for which I love you all dearly, but it does mean that we need to get right into shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, their happiness is going to be worth so much now that they've fought for it.

Princess_Zivaleh, I'm a bit too busy crying to have much to say to this, so...thank you!!

thephonyqueenofengland, I wonder if therapists exist in the Grishaverse at all. Maybe some of the more developed areas would have them, but probably not.

kanej_13, I do it because it's fun~

toovrede, hey buddy, you can breathe now! please don't die :)

Andhehe, thank you for mentioning the complexity of the conflict, because that's the part that is most important to me. They're complex people.

Book_Junkie007, honestly, I don't think Inej knows that she was his weakness then. She just thought of herself as useful enough asset that it made her a threat to be taken out of play, not a personal hit.

KiwisAndTea, I suppose you can do both, but if you scream into the void I won't hear it ;)

simpforjamespotter, *hands you a tissue*

andyoudoctor, it's so interesting that you mentioned this whole thing being practically doomed from the start, and I don't think you're wrong. Kaz does still have trouble understanding emotions and considering feelings, so that was his biggest mistake here.

Grishaverse4ever, I loved getting to use Wylan here. His friendship with Inej is under-utilized even in the books.

wicked333, we hate to see them suffer, but it makes us root for them that much more.

SpaceAce1123, that eyeballs emoji is my entire response to this comment. Is it coming? Is it an if or a when? I can't tell youuu~

LeoLou, your very British incoherence makes an author's day ;)

Raphale, I do have a guilty pleasure in breaking my favorite characters...

schemingface, I said a lot of what I wanted to say in my reply, but one thing I didn't mention is the Pekka thing, how she almost doesn't even see that as leaving Kaz...vulnerable in the same way? Because he beat Pekka. He beat the whole city. And they both know he would never harm her, so that leads to this realization they're both having that she can hurt him and he can't do anything about it.

There are books in the house—shelves full of them; maybe they were for show, but at any rate they're Kaz's now. There are books on Kerch law, finance, even a few on gardening; the cookbooks aren't much use to him, since Kaz's approach to eating has generally been to swipe things from the carts and stalls around the Barrel when the hollow feeling inside of him gets sharp enough.

At any rate, most of the time, he reads. He props his leg up on the coffee table and a book on his lap and learns things that the Barrel never taught him. He hangs his coat on the hook by the door, leaves his gloves on top of the piano, and loosens his tie. There are a few books of sheet music that he takes over to the piano and experiments with, but if he could ever read them, he can't now. Besides, Kaz has never liked to follow directions when he could invent his own way of doing things.

He sleeps, too. Almost on a regular schedule. The first time that he wakes up on the couch and it's already bright out, he's so disoriented that he nearly panics. He might just be losing it, but he could swear that the world takes on a new clarity when he's facing it with something more than the burnt-out stub of yesterday's energy.

After a day or two, he ventures back into the city, squinting in the sun that has come out for once. His cane is conspicuous, but he takes it anyway; the gloves, he leaves on the piano. It's less of a choice and more that he's halfway out the door when he remembers them, pauses, and keeps going.

One of those books was on the procedures of scientific experiments, so Kaz writes up his own experiment, hypothesis and all. Instead of walking past the stall that sells those candy-coated nuts and deftly nabbing a paper cone full, he actually pays (shame on him), and when the seller passes the cone to him, he allows their fingers to brush. His chest tightens, and he has to remind himself to breathe, but…that's as close as he gets to drowning.

So he tries again. Bumping against people on the street. Reaching for something or other at the same time as someone else. The smallest attempts, each carefully recorded and tucked away in his mind. Not every trial is a success; one time he tries walking through a crowd, and

the old sickness rises so badly that he has to duck out to gasp and retch in an alley, his hands curled into the fabric of his shirt.

Perhaps the crucial thing missing from this experiment, he thinks as he leans against the cold, rough brick that couldn't be less like flesh, is the why. Why bother? Who is it for? He's survived up to this point well enough.

Maybe I don't want to survive anymore, he thinks, mad and desperate. *Maybe I want to live.*

Maybe, Inej. Maybe Inej what? Maybe Inej would have a man who could kiss her, who could hold her? Maybe Inej would be able to succeed at this where he fails? Maybe Inej is the only way he *can* succeed at this?

He links his fingers—his bare, sensitive, vulnerable fingers—into the channels between the bricks and pulls himself properly to his feet. His cane must have slipped from his hand, but it only takes a moment to pick it up and right himself.

He won't drag himself to her, although he promised to if it came to it; he will walk, however. He's been staying out of the Barrel in order to not be spotted, so it won't be far to the Geldin district, but he has the sense that it's going to feel like a long walk.

Oh well. That's just a feeling, after all. He ignores those well enough.

(Except for in the case of what he's about to do.)

<><><>

Jordan asks where Kaz is, again. Inej is running out of answers.

He's busy. He has other places to be. It's a long walk to the Barrel.

Jordan says she can climb there.

"No, you can't." Why not? "Because I said no." Saints above, she sounds like her mother. But Wylan keeps trying to talk to her, and even Jesper has made a valiant attempt or two, and how is she supposed to leave all of this behind when everyone else is dragging it into the present with them?

She has never understood Jesper's desire to run and never stop as much as she does now.

"Mama, please. You were sad and then he stopped coming back. I'm a big girl. You can tell me." Jordan is sitting on the floor at the foot of Inej's chair, having completely abandoned the puzzle she was working on. There's a certain stubbornness in the set of her stare that Inej has seen before, but whether it was on Kaz or in the mirror she's not certain.

Jordan fidgets, squirming with as much restraint as a nine-year-old can be expected to. "He's not gone…forever, is he?"

Inej rubs a hand across her face. "No, Jordan, of course not. It's just…we had a disagreement."

Jordan frowns, too seriously for her age. “You had a fight? About what?”

Inej gets up and walks to the dresser, glancing at her reflection as she wraps her braid into a coil and starts pinning it. “It wasn’t a fight, it was just…he had ideas for how we could live here, you and me. And he didn’t ask me about them.”

“Oh.” Inej can’t see Jordan’s face in the mirror, but she can imagine that divot burrowing between her little black brows. “Were they good plans?”

Were they? They outlined a more domestic life than Inej had ever thought she’d be capable of, a nice house to live in and a school to send her daughter off to. What would she do, then? Cook and clean and sharpen her knives when no one was looking? Wash dishes with her blood-stained hands? Get used to the earth being so still beneath her? “Not for us,” Inej says, and puts a pin between her lips to free both of her hands.

There is a pause, in which she dares to hope that Jordan has gone back to her puzzle. Alas. “Did he want us to live with him?”

Inej is spared from having to answer immediately by having the hairpin in her mouth, but when she removes it, her excuse vanishes. “Yes.”

Jordan’s voice rises. “I *wanna* live with him!”

Inej steels herself, sweeps a few strands of hair back from her face. “It wouldn’t be safe.” *For you. For my heart.*

A whole storm of traitorous thoughts sits heavy in her chest. *Why are you so attached to a man you should barely remember, anyway?* It is so much easier to be jealous of him. To be mistrustful of him. To believe him when he says he’s a monster. Is she allowed to be tired of searching for the good, in him, in the world? Is she allowed to stop taking chances, to cut her losses, to protect herself?

But would she make herself the same promise that she made him? *I will have you without armor, or I will not have you at all.* If she refused to love him with his armor, then how can she love herself with hers?

Her wings have not been shorn. The loss of her ship hasn’t killed the spark that she fed through her years at the Menagerie. Maybe life isn’t fair, and she will never have her reprieve from pain. But the heart is an arrow, and if hers has lost its aim, she’ll have to give it some.

Or just go back to the place it’s always pointed. Not like the north of a compass, drawn no matter what, but like the aim of an arrow—chosen, calculated, and let to fly.

She turns back from the mirror. Jordan is sulking. Inej bends to kiss the crown of her head. “I’m going on a walk.”

“Can I come?” Jordan asks, not looking up from her puzzle.

Inej straightens to standing. “Not this time. But I won’t be long.” Then she’s out the door, down the hall, down the banister for old times’ sake.

In the end, she doesn't make it past the porch. He's already there.

Kaz is possibly as simply dressed as she's ever seen him when not ill or injured; his coat and vest are gone, leaving him in his tailored trousers and a black shirt that might be the one she saw him in last. The top two buttons are open at his throat, and not only are his hands bare, his pockets lie flat—he must not have his gloves with him.

Her heartbeat is already going too fast. Why did she think she had something to say to him? Why did she think she'd be able to do so much as open her mouth?

"You wouldn't think it would be quiet without you," he says, "but it has been." His hair is softer, looser. It's grown out a little on the sides, and there's a shadow along his jaw to match. The corner of his mouth curls up just slightly. She wants—she isn't sure what, anymore.

"I was going to find you."

"And so you have," he says, brushing some imaginary dust from his shirt with the hand that isn't resting on his cane. As if he hadn't noticed his hands. Kaz and his flair for the dramatic.

If for no other reason than to give herself time to think, Inej backs up to stand against the railing, leaving room for him opposite her. He steps into the space, and now anyone wanting to go inside would have to walk between them. Inej pities that poor, hypothetical soul.

"I'm not going to say that I'm sorry," she says, and realizes that she's squared her shoulders —the old habit. "Nor that I didn't mean what I said. Even if it was wrong, it was not impulsive."

"If I wanted you to apologize, I would be a fantastic hypocrite," says Kaz, arching a brow.

"Only cruel in the ways that pay," Inej murmurs, a slight smile tugging at her lips before she's realized it.

"Besides," Kaz adds, "I don't believe the Suli apologize. If I've heard correctly." It might just be the rare sunbeam striking them, but Inej swears that there's a glitter in his dark eyes.

"We don't. We make amends." Inej raises her chin in perfect performer's posture, straight as a knife. " *Mati en sheva yelu,* Kaz. This action will have no echo. And I mean that just as much as everything else I've said."

"I know you do," says Kaz, that little curl of his lips threatening to become a full smile. "You're dreadfully honest."

He looks happier, she thinks. And maybe it should needle her that he became happier without her, but…so much of the tension in his stance is gone. His expressions are more open. He reminds her more of the man she left on the docks those years ago, the one she's been searching for in him. Maybe he became better for himself. And really, isn't that what she wanted?

"I was afraid—of everything. Of you," she says, looking him square in the eye. *You've seen it every time you meet my eyes.*

That look is still there. She has to wonder if it ever left.

Kaz holds her gaze, gives her a calculating look. “You’d be in good company.”

Inej shakes her head and finds herself taking a tiny step closer. “I shouldn’t have been.” She is tired, but not in the way that she was before. She’s tired of running from him, from herself. Tired of hiding with every wall locked down. Tired of fighting alone for fear of betrayal. Tired of being alone, full stop.

“I’m still not ready to marry you,” she says, inhaling slowly, “and I’m not sure about the house. But Jordan should go to school.”

“That way she’ll never have Jesper mock her for not knowing that the earth goes around the sun,” Kaz mutters.

“What?”

He shakes his head, but even in his annoyance he looks slightly amused. “I assume you’d like to arrange that yourself.”

“A wanted criminal signing her up would probably raise some questions, Kaz.” Without thinking about it or quite meaning to, she takes another step closer to him. She still isn’t sure what she wants, but this is something like it.

At this distance, or lack thereof, she sees the shift in his face, the decision in the steadiness of his gaze, before he holds his hand out to her.

Inej takes a slow, steadying breath. She knows what that hand really means. The same man who collects enemies like trophies and accepts insults like the highest of praise is offering her his bleeding, beating heart—one that, as it turns out, is just as human as hers.

She takes his hand, and he doesn’t so much as flinch.

He gives a gentle pull, and Inej allows herself to be drawn forward, to fall, and this time she lands in his arms. She leans into his strong and solid frame, clinging tight to him, and now it’s not the scent of ink and coffee surrounding her, but that of old books. His hand goes to her hair; his arms are around her, holding her up.

“I mean what I said, too.” His words are stilted, strained, unsteady as a child learning to walk the wire, but they are—as he would say—dreadfully honest. “And what I wrote.”

A Ghafa does not work with a net, but Inej thinks that, every once in a while, she could allow Kaz to catch her.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Inej trains some young spies. Kaz tries something new.

Chapter Notes

The comments on the last chapter were, essentially, a collective sigh of relief, which makes for some fun shout-outs~

the_purple_duck, I told you that the reunion would be sweeter for waiting ;)

Violetstar5, once again I have to share my remorse for your cold soup, but I'm glad that I could offer you the good kind of distress.

toovrede, I was getting worried about you there.

thephonyqueenofengland, and it's so much better after they've fought for it, isn't it?

that1annoyingbitch, I think I already expressed my appreciation for your general yelling, but it really is great.

SpaceAce1123, as they say at Chick-fil-a, it's my pleasure.

Andhehe, and as I say at my job, you're *very* welcome.

KiwisAndTea, I will sit on Wylan's porch with you. Grab some waffles and watch the show <3

Emzigale07, thank you so much for this, especially for complimenting my prose! The actual wording is something that's very dear to my heart; I think that's why I love it so much when people share their favorite quotes.

wicked333, I'm glad I could offer you a little peace. Hopefully Kaz and Inej can find that same feeling <3

hardly_a_ghost, in fic, as in real life, a good conversation can bring you peace like nothing else.

andyoudoctor, I have to say, the *dedication* of writing me a whole essay even when your internet is on the fritz is...I'm so in awe of you. Of all of my readers, really. You all do so much for me just by appreciating this little thing that I made <3

Raphale, it was important to me to have them reconcile the way that they would—fumbling a little, but fighting their way back to each other because they care enough to try.

LeoLou, I was pretty proud of that closing line. It's just such an underrated through line for Inej, the way that she wants to be independent and beholden to no one, the way she feels confident in what she can do, and she really doesn't want to trust Kaz (which makes sense in context). Those things are intertwined in a certain way where it becomes her mental pathway to finally letting go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz likes to be sure of his plans, and he wasn't at all sure that Inej would come—given what happened the last time she received a note from him. But she is as elegant in her forgiveness as he is not, and so some part of him is unsurprised when she is waiting in the safe house in the warehouse district.

It's raining—when is it not raining?—but somehow she is completely dry, sitting on a stack of crates. He allows himself a moment to imagine her, lithe and agile, dancing around raindrops, dodging every single one. It keeps getting harder not to allow the thoughts, even when he feels himself slipping. Dangerous, and wholly irresistible. Something has finally chipped away at his monstrous will.

"Jordan starts school today," says Inej, a note of pride in her voice. He loves to see her like this, loves to see how purely happy Jordan makes her, without all of the complications that he himself brings. She deserves to feel it more often.

"She'll have at least six teacher's notes by the end of the day," says Kaz. "And I predict she'll escape from detention at least once before the week is out."

"If she does, it's your fault," says Inej, but there's a bit of a smile behind her stern expression.

"Did *I* teach her the art of spycraft, Wraith?"

If Inej were the sort to roll her eyes, he gets the feeling that she would. Instead, she says, "You called me here for a reason. What business, Kaz?"

Kaz beckons her down from the crates and glances out the window, leaning on his cane. He'd like to sit, but they have a short walk to take while he explains the plan. It's easy to forget he's a few years off from thirty yet; he feels so old, some of these days. "I could depend on moving into a nice, big house to keep you busy for a few days, if that. When most people refer to being bored as 'climbing the walls' it's a metaphor, but in your case…"

Inej slips noiselessly off the crate and walks up to meet him. "The point?"

Right. He's getting to that. He keeps talking as he walks out the door, his collar turned up, staying beneath the overhangs of buildings. "To the surprise of approximately no one, I never found you a proper replacement. The solution became to have a team. Small, agile, and quiet. They handle the collection of information, while Roeder and others like him handle combat."

Inej has been matching his pace, and now she turns her face to him, dark eyes scrutinizing. She's so silent that he could be walking alone. "Small and agile? Don't tell me you're inducting children."

"Inducting, no. They are not part of the Dregs, and won't be until they're at least fourteen or so. But that doesn't mean that they can't be useful as long as they share our resources."

Once again, he feels as if Inej's eyes cut deeper than her blades ever could, that she sees right through his layers to the core of him. "Weren't you twelve when you joined?"

He was. But while he had never made death his servant, it had been his companion, and he's not going to rely on any of these kids being so lucky. "They're not ready, and they won't be by then. Besides, they do better work when they're fighting to prove themselves to me."

It's all perfectly logical—to have these little spiders bearing no mark of his gang, making them harder to trace, while at the same time being indebted to him for their survival and desperate to prove their worth. It makes sense. But what doesn't is that any one of them, any one of these urchins who crawled in off the street, could be that little farm boy from Lij. Any one of them could be a Kaz Rietveld, a Felix Pieterse. A Jordie. He sees it in their faces, a look he remembers from hours practicing magic tricks in front of a smudged mirror.

He wants for them what he wants for Jordan, that they can get out of this damn city and live like real people do. *The city's winning right now, but you'll see who wins in the end.* He beat Pekka Rollins, but he's not stopping until he's made Ketterdam itself kneel. Just like he picked off pigeons from the Dime Lions and stole from their shipments, he's pulling victims from the canals and making them his instead. A crow's wing casts a long shadow, but it can also make an excellent shield.

He knows by the look on Inej's face as they arrive at the designated building that she has more questions, but instead she says, "All right. What does this have to do with me?"

"I want you to train them," Kaz tells her, and pushes open the door. "You don't need finesse to be a bruiser or brawler, but scaling walls is a different trick."

"I'm aware," says Inej, looking around. Kaz scrutinizes the place through her eyes—ropes hanging from the ceiling, metal bits attached to the walls, and three eager, rather grubby faces turned up to them. Personally, Kaz is as surprised as he ever is that they not only showed up, but stayed put.

Simon is the first one to leap to his feet. He is as Kerch as they come—strawberry blond, freckles on his reddened nose, scrawny as a twig. Apparently he wanted to be a dancer before he lost his father to drink. He was attempting to perform for coins on East Stave when Kaz found him, and part of what sold him was that he wasn't half bad, even probably starving. "I want to start on the climbing ropes!" he blurts out.

“Maybe you should start by teaching them to be quiet,” Kaz comments to Inej.

She, however, looks vaguely amused. He hopes that she stays this patient.

Thea is staring at Inej as if she’s made of rainbows. Thea is seven, Kaelish mixed with Ghezen knows what, and still missing her front teeth. Knowing her, Kaz would not be surprised if she lost them in a fight, rather than by the usual methods.

Inej goes to sit, cross-legged, in front of the group, and Kaz allows himself to fade into the background, to sit on one of the boxes they’ve set up for jumping practice and stretch his leg out. He can picture Inej at home like this, teaching her cousins, perhaps, showing the children of the caravan how to turn a cartwheel or walk a wire. Whether or not he’s to blame for the loss of the *Wraith* , recent revelations would suggest that he wants Inej, wherever she lands, to be happy. This is the best that he can give her. This is the only way he knows how to tell her. Hopefully, it’s enough.

She’s standing now, demonstrating something. Om has moved closer to her, Kaz notices. Om is Suli, and while he’s probably about ten or eleven, no one has gotten him to say more than a few words since he was caught stealing from the vendors outside of the Crow Club. Out of the three, he joined most recently, and Kaz still has yet to uncover his story. Maybe Inej will have more luck.

The little spiders are more attentive to Inej than they’ve ever been to him, which Kaz supposes shouldn’t really be a surprise; he watches her patience with them, and with herself when she struggles to explain. After two hours has passed, Thea in particular is glued to her side, but they all seem to instinctively trail her around. Kaz has a brief mental image of a line of ducklings.

Inej comes back to him, the little spiders in tow. “They should have shoes made,” she says. “Rubber ones like I had.”

He’s not going to tell her that he already mentioned it to Jesper, and just nods. To the little spiders, he says, “If you can beat me back to the Slat, I’ll consider this a success.” He’s planning to stay behind for a bit, but they don’t need to know that.

“What’s dinner?” says Thea, lisping.

“The sooner you get there, the sooner you find out,” says Kaz, and watches them scamper off, already climbing up the walls and out the high windows.

When he looks at Inej, she’s smiling. There’s a light sheen of sweat across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “You sound like a father,” she teases.

Kaz thinks of Jordan, at school, living the life that he might have had. If Jakob Hertzoon were real, him and his wife and daughter and Thirteen Zelverstraat…he might have taken Kaz and Jordie in the way he and Inej have done for Jordan. The thought is jarring, as if his child-self hadn’t prayed for it to happen every night until the harbor. “They’d better not think so,” he says. “I’m giving them a place to survive, not coddling and games of catch.”

“They’re not the only ones you’re giving a job,” says Inej, taking a step closer to him. Even the premonition of having her near sends a thrill through him. He still remembers what it was like to hold her—glorious and overwhelming.

Part of him wants to draw closer still. Part of him wants to run. In the end, he stays right where he is, his cane leaning against his thigh. “Well, it’s not as if I was going to have Roeder teach them.”

“Of course,” says Inej, arching an eyebrow. “At least you admit that I’m the best.” Yet another step closer. If she took one or two more, their knees would be touching, her standing and him sitting. It’s nearly unbearable, the indecision, the *almost* of it all. A decade’s worth of *almost* is stretched tight between them, a taut string from one to the other, and the question now seems to be not if it will fall slack, but when.

“I never denied it,” says Kaz, his voice sounding hoarse to his ears. “I just never said anything else.” His hands are clenched around each other in his lap, so it doesn’t take much to fumble with his gloves and peel them away. He would have come without them, but he didn’t want the little spiders to see. He can’t risk looking vulnerable to them.

Inej is watching, always watching and waiting. He sees how tired she is, sometimes, of the waiting, but doesn’t she know that he is too? It’s just that between the both of them, they’re both waiting for him to act, to make the choice.

Her lips part, and there’s a beat of silence between the action and her speech in which Kaz’s mind floods with images, driven half-mad by the little black space in between. “Will you now, Kaz?” she says.

He will never tire of hearing her say his name. Perhaps that’s what makes him get to his feet, laying his cane aside, before he loses his nerve completely. “I have something else to give you.”

Another step. She tilts her face up to him. He can feel his heart beating against his ribs like a trapped bird, a caged crow. He has fought this city tooth and nail since he was a child, but in this moment, to begin, to take her hand, feels like the hardest thing he’s ever done. “Squeeze it,” he says, his voice sounding dry and thin and utterly foreign. “Tight enough to hurt.”

Inej doesn’t ask, she just obliges, gripping his hand with all of her strength, and he remembers why he loves her. It’s enough to keep going, to move to the next step. To not look further than that.

He takes up her free hand in the one of his that’s unoccupied—two points of contact, treading water—and brings it shakily to his lips. He kisses each of her knuckles, the join of her index and thumb, taking refuge in the bone and taut muscle just beneath her skin. *Alive, alive, alive.*

He looks at Inej, for confirmation, to see that everything’s all right, and finds the same glance reflected back at him. Mirrors of one another, they nod. *Go on* . Take the next step. He listens to her breathing, feels her dig her nails into his hand. She is strong against his touch, not listless. *Alive, alive, alive.* Maybe it keeps her anchored too.

Kaz bends close, his face beside hers, near her cheek and neck and shoulder and *skin,* so much of it, why did he think that he could do this again? But her breath hits his cheek, as shaky as his, he thinks, and she's clinging to his hand for dear life, and he's not going to drown if it means taking Inej with him. He crosses the distance, puts his lips to her shoulder, to the base of her neck, like he did when he was seventeen and had no hope of living to try again. The pearl earring touches the side of his face. She still wears it, he realizes hazily.

Inej gives his hand a brief, tighter squeeze. It's an assent, an encouragement. She must be able to hear his heartbeat by now.

As most people tend to be, Kaz is more in control of his body and his thoughts than he was as a teenager, but deprivation will do something to a man. They're barely touching, yet a low flame burns somewhere below his gut, driving him on, begging for more, closer, a flood of imaginings too powerful for him to stop. But the things he wants, neither of them is ready for.

Instead, almost trembling with what could be panic or anticipation or the feeling he dares not name, he brings his lips to her cheek—the softest he's tried yet, the closest to the decay that lingers beneath the surface of his memories. For a moment, it's—it's. It's brown eyes deadened to gray, so much gray, rotting gray flesh and cold gray water. Kaz pulls back, turns his face away, clamps his mouth shut as sickness threatens to claw its way up his throat. Her lips will be worse. He can't do this.

But there's a spark of pain that's out of place in this memory, a pressure on his hand, points of stabbing sharpness. Hazily, he drifts back, his eyes going to Inej's grip on his hand before they register what they're seeing. Funny that most people would call it a death grip. For him, it's a reminder of life.

He has to try. For Inej's sake and for his own, for the practice and the progress he's been chasing like anything else he's ever wanted to learn, he has to try. He straightens up, then inclines his face towards her, fixes his eyes on hers, worlds trapped in amber. All it will take is the slightest motion, to let gravity bend him.

He can't do it.

His expression, he knows, must betray his frustration, but before he has much time to think about it, Inej has risen up and brushed her lips across his. Gentle as a moth's wing. That's all it is—there and then gone. A magic trick. The most perfect magic trick he's ever seen.

Inej settles back onto her heels. She's looking at him almost shyly, a flush of burgundy on her cheeks. He's spent so long collecting the details of her, and yet—when he looks at the whole picture, he finds himself startled by how beautiful she is.

"Try it again," he whispers. Kaz Brekker has never had much respect for religion, but he dares not raise his voice in this holy place.

This time, when she kisses him, Inej slides her free hand into his hair; Kaz is a little surprised at himself when a soft gasp breaks from the back of his throat at this, but if she notices, she

doesn't falter. This kiss is perhaps a second longer than the first, a harder press, and Kaz leans into it, makes himself think of nothing but her.

They part, and his heart is thundering; not like he's just had a fight, but like he's just won one. Like he's spat blood on the floor, bared his teeth, and held up his fist—yes, it was the hardest thing he's ever done, he says to the spectators, but he did it. He remembers feeling like this after playing tag with Jordie, running through the fields all day before collapsing in the grass, smiling so hard his face hurt. And for the first time, the memory of his brother is gentle, as gentle as Inej's touch.

He meets her eyes, and there's a shine in them, of tears maybe—Kaz almost worries, but then she's laughing, loud and startling and radiant, and he thinks that maybe his old wish has come true. Maybe he is drunk on it, the way that he feels—euphoric, unsteady, and incredibly foolish.

I love you. He wants to say it. He wants to learn 'I love you' in every language and say it to her in all of them. He wants to say it until the words lose all meaning. But anything that he says right now will come out sounding like it, anyway.

"Don't," says Inej, another laugh breaking over her voice. "You don't need to. You don't need to say anything."

I want to, Kaz thinks, but she's right—he can't. The only word he can properly think of is her name.

"I thought maybe," she says, squaring her shoulders, "once Jordan and I are properly moved into the house, we could…celebrate it. Something small. But I'd like for you to come. I think she—"

"I will." So simple. And as he expected, it sounds like a lot more than what it means. But she knows.

She knows, and she beams like the sun. Kaz wonders if it's still raining outside. If it is, it won't matter. Nothing can touch him right now.

They don't say anything else; they've never needed to, have they? Kaz turns his back, lets her disappear; he has to get back to the Slat, and somehow compose himself on the way there. The little ones will have beaten him back, of course, so he'll likely have to craft an excuse; for now, he has the whole length of the warehouse district to smile like an idiot and hope he doesn't get seen.

Chapter End Notes

comments clear my skin, water my crops, etc etc. seriously though, I adore you all <3

Letters

Chapter Summary

Letters between Ketterdam and somewhere in the Kerch countryside, sent over a period of about a year with progressively better spelling.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind words last week! I am back as promised with a new chapter before I head off into another busy day, and of course with some shout-outs~

hardly_a_ghost, trust that your comments make *my* day, no matter how it's gone <3

the_purple_duck, thank you so much for this!

Book_Junkie007, I really love this idea, especially because it fits them so well. A chance might be all they need.

Emzigale07, they're very good at improvising and adapting, and they're learning to do more than just survive by that.

LeoLou, *keysmashes right back at ya*

thephonyqueenofengland, awww, I love that story about running between the raindrops! So cute!

Raphale, thank you so much! We've waited a long time for this release.

andyoudoctor, thank you! I will write a better reply to this later, but I always adore your comments.

Kanejsupremacy850, <333333

wicked333, I think we're all just a bunch of smiley idiots right now XD.

Andhehe, thank you!!

alltheworldisinmyhead, had to make the wait worth it ;)

marie, I'm sobbing with you <3

Letters between Ketterdam and somewhere in the Kerch countryside, sent over a period of about a year with progressively better spelling.

~~Deer~~ Dear Alby

We're learning about writing letters in school. I do school now. Your map was very hellpfull. Duh, since I'm alive and writing to you. My teacher says not to say duh. She says it makes me sound dumb. I think she just doesent like me because she got me in trouble 6 times this week. It was ~~Lewieses~~ Lewies's fault for being rude to me so DUH I hit him. My da told me not to let people push me around so I don't, not even dumb teachers who don't want me to say duh.

~~Sinceer~~ ~~Seneer~~ ~~S~~ Goodbye,

Jordan

Some weeks later, on a piece of paper stolen from his father's desk:

Dear Jordan,

I'm glad you're alive. That's sort of important. Also I'm glad that map was H-E-L-P-F-U-L with one L each. Maybe your teacher really is dumb if she can't teach you to spell helpful right. I'm sorry you have a dumb teacher. But tell your da no if he wants to get you a tutor like I have, then you'll be shut up in the house all the time.

What did Lewies do to you? If he was only annoying you, you probably shouldn't have hit him. When you're a grown up you can't just go around hitting people.

Sincerely,

Alby

A stretch of time later which was certainly not spent in sulking:

Not-dear Alby,

I D-O-N-T C-A-R-E. You knew what I meant didn't you. You are almost as rude as Lewies and I kicked dirt on him two weeks ago. I didn't kick it very high but it still got on his uniform. I didn't hit him because you said that grown ups don't hit people, but I know that's wrong because my mama taught me how to hit people and she's a grown up. And Lewies deserved it because he was saying things about her, that she wasn't an anybody and it was ~~scspishus~~ ~~suspeshus~~ he suspekted me for just showing up and starting at the school. Duh she is a somebody. Every person is a somebody. Even you are a somebody, you are just an annoying somebody.

My da wouldn't get me a tutor because he never lets anybody come to our house. Which makes sense because as you know I got kidnapped one time. At least I think you know. If I didn't tell you I got kidnapped one time, that's what I was running away from. Don't get kidnapped. I'm a pirate so I can get away but you couldn't.

GOODBYE,

Jordan

A few weeks later, with a rough sketch of a landscape tucked into the envelope:

Even-less-dear Jordan,

I did know what you meant, but it took me a minute to figure it out. It would have been easier if you would of just written it right. Besides, nobody will take you seriously if you can't write. *Duh,* like you would say. I am not as rude as Lewies because I would never insult your ma. Even though she taught you how to hit people, which is weird.

You did not tell me that you were kidnapped. Maybe Lewies was right to be S-U-S-P-I-C-I-O-U-S about you if you got kidnapped and your ma teaches you to hit people and your da doesn't let anyone come to the house.

But I guess my da doesn't really let people come to my house either. You're probably right that I couldn't get away, so I'll try my best not to get kidnapped.

Sincerely,

Alby

Sometime later, during which Jordan was presumably working on her spelling:

Kind-of-dear Alby,

Your drawing looked nice. Is that a place by your house? I don't remember very much about your house because I was scared when I was there. I made a friend at school by the way. Her name is Raina and she is nice. Even though she told me not to hit Lewies, she told me not to apologize to him either.

My mama is NOT WEIRD. She is AMAZING and you can NEVER be mean to her or I will never write you any more letters ever again. And you are exactly right that you are wrong because da's are just like that and they don't want us to get kidnapped.

We are learning about books in school. Have you heard of Ghezen's Wood by…I dunno how to spell his name. Peter something. My mama and da have never read it but my da wants to read it when I'm done. He reads lots of books when he's at our house. The book is ~~confyu confuz~~ confusing. There are lots of words that I don't know in it. My teacher says it's about man versus nature but it isn't like he is fighting the trees or anything. That would make it a less boring book. I dunno why we have to read boring books. I am nine.

BUT! I am almost ten and we are going to have a party. You ~~probcrly~~ probably can't come to the party but I will write to you about it.

Sincerely,

Jordan

Shortly after, containing a wrapped parcel—a bracelet made of wooden letter beads that reads, JORDAN:

Dear Jordan,

I made you a present for your birthday. It's probably early, but I would rather it be early than late. I have lots of craft stuff because I have to stay in the house all the time so I made you a

bracelet out of beads. Let me know if it's too big or something.

Your spelling is getting better. Maybe that book is helping you even if it is boring. I have heard of Ghezen's Wood but I read it this year, the writer's name is Peter Johannes. I am surprised you're reading it already. You must be at some fancy kind of school. I can't imagine you at a fancy school. I bet it's funny to see you all dressed up. Do you wear a uniform?

The drawing is how it looks out of the window over my desk. There is a creek back there where I sometimes catch frogs even though I get in trouble for catching them. Your friend sounds nice. I bet she isn't as pretty as you though. She is right that you shouldn't hit Lewies anymore. If you are going to a fancy school you should stay there.

You also spelled sincerely right,

Alby

Written on some fresh stationery that was, presumably, a birthday gift:

Dear Alby,

I am ten now. Thank you for the bracelet!! It's very nice and so are you, when you stop correcting me on my spelling. It fits just right even though I can't tell my mama and da because they might tell me not to write to you anymore. I met you and I know you're okay, but they should probably meet you first. I bet they will like you. Just don't correct them on their spelling. Specially my mama. She didn't learn to read and write Kerch until she was 14 but that is because she knew Suli before that.

I finished reading Ghezen's Wood even though I did not want to and I beat Lewies on the quiz, so THERE. Reading is okay but I like math better. My da is smart with numbers and can get them all nice and neat in his head so he can help me. I have to wear a uniform which is stupid because it's a dark blue dress thing that is very hard to be a pirate in. Raina says I shouldn't say stupid but my da says plenty worse words and I will say them all to Lewies.

I told you I was going to tell you about the party so I am going to tell you that now. My da came and had a long dinner with me and my mama and I got to stay up late. There was pudding. Pudding was my new favorite food for five minutes until there were waffles and now waffles are my favorite food. You need to eat them with berry syrup. It is THE BEST. I got a new knife because I lost my old one and we had hot chocolate. Hot chocolate and waffles with berry syrup is YUMMY and I want to have it every day forever.

Old-ly,

Jordan

Containing a sketch of what appears to be a crooked branch but, on closer inspection, turns out to be a snake:

Dear Jordan,

Ten is only sort of old because I am older than you. Ha-ha. Maybe I shouldn't have said that because now you won't think I'm nice anymore. I like your new paper also. Was that a birthday present too? I got a new sketchbook when I turned eleven and I went out and drew some pictures and even though that was a while ago, I drew one for you before I wrote this. It is a snake that I saw. I like snakes as long as they are far away from me.

Your da sounds sort of like mine. My da is also good with numbers and also doesn't let people come to the house. Maybe they would get along. That would be funny.

I know you don't like your uniform but I bet you look awfully cute in it. You can go and say bad words to Lewies as long as you don't hit him again and don't get caught. My da says swears a lot because he's part Kaelish and they're all like that.

Maybe I will ask him if we can have waffles sometime. Although then I would have to tell where I got the idea from. I s'pose I could just say it was a book or something like that. If I came to see you we could have waffles. But that probably can't happen either.

Older-ly,

Alby

Sent in such a hurry that it's a miracle it was mailed to the correct recipient:

Dear Alby,

Ten IS SO old because oldness isn't ~~reliti reletiv~~ relative. I also like my new paper. I just can't write on it right now because I am about to go see my mama and my friends and so I

just stole some paper off of my da's desk. It has some pictures on the back but I think it's just a poster or something.

The snake picture is very good. It almost desgises its self in it like they do in real life. I would like to pet a snake.

I would rather look scary than cute in my uniform but thank you anyways. And I don't need your ~~pamis~~ ~~parmish~~ permisshun to say swears at Lewies, although it is funny that your da says swears a lot. Mine taught me like five new ones when his stick that he walks with hit the corner of the table and he almost fell over it.

I need to tell you about my new friends. They are named Thea and Simon and Om and I am learning to climb and fight with them. My mama is teaching us. I want to try walking on a tightrope but she won't let me even though I KNOW she was doing it when she was my age. Parents are NOT FAIR.

Okay she is telling me to go now. But if you ever come here maybe I can see you. Just not at my house.

Goodbye,

Jordan

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz stays for dinner.

Chapter Notes

I have to say, the collective panic in the comments of the last chapter was very funny to me. I have trained you all so well. And, of course, I must address that panic with some shout-outs~

schemingface, succint and to the point. Brevity is the soul of wit, or of abject fear in this case.

Book_Junkie007, silly Alby indeed. If only he knew that his dad was once a part of that world.

kanej_13, don't worry, it won't take me *too* long to reveal what those were. We just have to have some fluff first.

thephonyqueenofengland, I agree with the spelling comment. My old diary still haunts me.

KiwisAndTea, I'm rather fond of the fact that you all have learned not to trust me. It makes it easy to just throw in a threatening detail, follow it up with some fluff, and watch everyone panic.

whynotcherries, thank you so much!! Of course Jordan would have learned to be *like that* with the parents that she has.

SweetShireBones, I love how innocent they are :)

Andhehe, and Kaz totally would do that. Either when Inej wasn't there, or when she *was* there and was just giving him a disapproving look in the background.

Raphale, comedic irony is only improved by cute kids being clueless.

wicked333, on a more serious note, it really is interesting to think about what Kaz and Pekka have in common.

the_purple_duck, I don't know...is it going to be relevant...? hehe >:)

LeoLou, I love the idea of online friends being the equivalent because yes! Now I'm just imagining a modern AU with angsty teenager Jordan hiding her phone from her parents...XD

Jmbliss, I don't know what you could possibly mean.

andyoudoctor, I too love the little moments! It's my favorite thing when they get noticed <3

Adriennezzz, you know what would be really funny, is if they weren't anything important at all. But I don't know if I'm mean enough to do that to you.

eekabee, well, at least Alby wants to keep the letters a secret too, so presumably he isn't showing them to his dad. We can hope.

Emzigale07, I love writing them so much! They are so cute <3

When Inej gets home, the lights are already on.

She puts a hand on Jordan's shoulder and steps in front of her, facing the stairs, scanning the house's exterior; what kind of amateur burglar would leave the lights on? Or turn them on to begin with? She's slipped a knife into her free hand just in case; she checks the doors and windows for disturbed locks, broken seals, and then—

The window boxes. All the tension runs out of Inej, and she gives the door a disapproving look, imagining that it cuts straight through the wood.

The window boxes used to contain tulips, but now they are filled with wild geraniums.

"What happened?" Jordan asks from behind her.

Inej just gives an irritated sigh and climbs the stairs, then pushes the door open. Kaz is sitting inside, his bad leg propped up on the coffee table, flipping through one of Jordan's books—*Ghezen's Wood,* it looks like.

"You have a key," she says, while Jordan rushes past her.

Kaz doesn't look up from the book, merely raising his eyebrows. "Who's to say that I didn't use it?"

Inej slips off her headscarf and hangs it on one of the hooks by the door. "Jordan, take your shoes off." Back to Kaz, she says, "Isn't that one of Jordan's books?"

Jordan, who has returned to deposit her shoes by the door, nods grimly. "It's not a good book. It's boring. Do we have mail?"

“Is this about your pen pal from that assignment?” Inej asks. “Not that I’ve seen. But isn’t the project over, anyway? You’re done with school for the summer.”

Jordan doesn’t answer; she merely looks dejected and drags herself over to the couch to sit beside Kaz, rocking back and forth impatiently.

Kaz slowly looks up, pointedly ignoring the child next to him. “Yes, it’s one of Jordan’s books. But I personally find it interesting.” He arches an eyebrow as if daring Inej to disagree.

She does not. Instead, she says, “You’re supposed to congratulate her.”

Kaz turns a page, slowly, clearly enjoying himself. “Who?”

Jordan bounces to her feet, apparently having had enough. “Me! I’m smart now!”

“You’ve only had one year,” says Inej. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Still, she is proud of her daughter, prouder than she might admit; she and Kaz learned only what they needed to know at the hand of the world, and she wishes for Jordan to have more options than the lives they’ve landed in.

Then again, she thinks, looking around—at the house, the bookshelves, the piano, Kaz giving Jordan an amused look as she rattles off the things she’s learned—they’ve landed rather well. It was just a long, hard fall.

She crosses to stand behind the sofa, at Kaz’s shoulder. “Any luck with tracking down the bounty hunters?”

He withdraws a slip of paper from the pocket of his vest and holds it up between two fingers —two bare fingers, Inej is pleased to notice. “Not luck,” he says. “I don’t believe in it, and if I did I wouldn’t have any.”

“You’re lucky you’re alive,” Inej returns, taking the folded note, touching her fingertips to his as she does. It’s a test, a question, and Kaz doesn’t so much as flinch. She pockets the slip of paper for later; she’ll compare it to what Wylan has gathered from Council meetings when she gets the chance, but this time is for her family.

Speaking of which—she reaches over Kaz’s shoulder and takes the book from his hands, folding the page corner to mark his spot. The fact that she’s able to take it lets her know that he isn’t genuinely bothered; if he were, he wouldn’t have let go.

Instead, he just gives her a look, a watered-down version of his usual glare. “You can finish it later,” Inej tells him in the voice that she uses when Jordan is getting whiny.

The glare darkens a shade, but Jordan provides the perfect distraction by flopping back onto the couch. “Is it a good hug day?” she asks, overly serious about it. The idea of good days and bad days has been difficult to explain to her, but Inej takes pride in the effort Jordan has put into learning to ask.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Kaz, hooking an arm over the back of the couch in such a way as to create a Jordan-shaped space against his side. “I don’t give hugs.”

Jordan grins devilishly and scoots over to sit beneath his arm. Inej sees the old lines of tension rise in Kaz’s shoulders, but she sees when he forces them down as well.

Jordan had wanted to invite Simon, Thea, and Om to celebrate with them, but Kaz had staunchly refused, telling her that she could play with them at training. To a certain degree, Inej understands; it is dangerous to mix those lives. Kaz has survived and protected their family by being cruel in public and kind in private, so who would he be if the lines were blurred? At the end of the day, the little spiders are still working for him, and they don’t need to see him like this.

But she sees it, and loves it. He has taught her to collect secrets, to guard them close, and these secret pieces that she adds to her mental collage of him are among her most cherished.

“I want dinner,” Jordan proclaims, squirming. Inej moves out from behind the couch and crosses toward the adjacent kitchen, touching a hand to her daughter’s knee in passing. “Hold still.”

Kaz, however, catches her eye and gives her a look—not quite a shake of his head, but it means: *don’t. It’s all right.* Inej wonders if Jordan moving around helps him to stay tethered.

“Are you buying?” Kaz asks Jordan, somewhere in Inej’s periphery as she opens a cabinet and withdraws the *hutspot* she’d purchased earlier to heat up—breakfast for dinner, special for Jordan. She hadn’t thought that she would warm to this life, and she’ll never be the cook that her mama is, but when Jordan is at school, she’s been exploring the city, rediscovering old Suli recipes and artifacts in Little Ravka. One day, there was even some genuine silk on sale.

“No,” says Jordan, sounding insulted. “I’m a pirate. I don’t need to buy things.”

Inej can only imagine how proud Kaz must look. With a slight shake of her head to herself, she fishes a few soapy plates out of the sink.

She hears Kaz’s footsteps as he rises and crosses over the hallway between the rooms to join her. He must be standing behind her when he stops; she can sense the closeness. It makes her skin prickle in a pleasant way.

When she glances over her shoulder, there’s a look of intent in his eyes; they’re still not in a place where his looking at her like that can come to much, but it makes a pleasant heat creep through her nonetheless. She holds up her wet hands, signaling him to wait a moment—trying anything before she’s dried them won’t go well—then dries them off thoroughly with a hand towel that hangs nearby.

She’s not sure what she’s expecting, but it isn’t for Kaz to move fully into the kitchen, hunt down a pot, and set it over the stovetop. He takes the containers of *hutspot* from her hands, and she knows that the slight contact of their fingertips as he does so is intentional.

She watches the precision of his movements as he sets it to heat, the same precision that's there when he's shuffling cards or picking a lock. She finds herself mesmerized by his focus, sixteen and flustered again, her imagination getting away from her with half-formed images of the other applications of that intent. Foolish as they ever were. But rather braver in their clarity, these days.

Kaz rolls his sleeves to his elbows, exposing lithe-muscled forearms and his Dregs tattoo. It's an experiment, but Inej wonders if he's also showing off, even slightly. But maybe she's just thinking that way because it's working.

Saints' sake. Get a hold of yourself.

Hopefully he's about to say or do something particularly Kaz-like that will make this easier, make reality crash back over her. But the way he is tonight…

He seems oblivious to the effect he's created as he moves the pot, long fingers wrapped around its handle, but Inej suspects that he isn't. She slips up behind him, silent as ever even though she knows he'll sense her presence, and slides her fingers up into the short-shorn hairs at the back of his neck, absentmindedly toying with the longer strands. He startles at first—movements pausing, pupils dilating—but leans into the touch in a way that makes her think he doesn't realize he's doing it.

"Eww," says Jordan, wandering into the kitchen. Inej drops her hand to rest more safely on Kaz's shoulder, protected by the fabric of his shirt. The danger of having Jordan around is, of course, getting caught like a couple of blushing teenagers.

Jordan has grown into her legs and no longer has to stand on tiptoes to look over the rim of the pot, a grin crossing her face as she catches the scent.

Inej nudges Jordan with her leg. "Be patient, Jordan."

Jordan gives a scowl that looks absurdly like a smaller, cuter version of Kaz's. "But I'm hungry."

"All good things in time," says Kaz, a slight smirk touching his lips. He looks back over his shoulder, and Inej knows that he means to meet her eyes—at least until he adds, "You know what they say about revenge."

Inej sighs. "Kaz Brekker, you're being a bad influence."

"Well, if I were being a good one, I hope you'd assume I was an impostor," says Kaz, moving the steaming pot over to rest on the counter.

Inej presses her lips together, but she can't look entirely unimpressed, because to some degree, he's right. She has already wondered more than once tonight if this is real, or if it's some vivid dream that could shatter at any moment.

The wondering lingers even as she's eating with her family, as Jordan is making a nuisance of herself by refusing to sit on her chair properly, as Kaz debates with her about *Ghezen's Wood*

, as Inej sees him smile when he thinks she isn't looking.

"My teacher says it's man versus nature but he doesn't fight the trees or anything," Jordan is complaining, kneeling on her chair. "It's *boring.* "

"Man versus nature just means that he's trying to survive," Inej puts in between contemplative mouthfuls.

"So is everyone else," says Kaz, twirling his fork. It catches the light, reflecting it in patterns over his sun-starved skin. "But some of us have a more exciting time of it."

"Right. So it's like I said. It's *boring* ," Jordan proclaims, and returns to stuffing her face.

Kaz raises his eyebrows. "The council has spoken."

"Speaking of the Council." Inej withdraws the list that he gave to her earlier. "As long as I'm feeding information to the bounty hunters, we need Wylan to keep the Council off their backs. That'll be easier once we root out the remaining members with interests in the slave trade."

"Maurits Hembrecht has been robbed of his jaunts to the Willow Switch since it shut down, but that wouldn't stop him from cutting the middleman to feed his tastes," says Kaz, drawing an idle circle on his plate with his fork. "He is organized to the point of being obsessive, which makes it hard for him to hide records."

"A mission? Can I come?" Jordan bounces in her seat.

"Not this time, *m eja* ," says Inej, rising to clean off her plate. From behind her, Jordan whines.

"It's not fair! You're so scared now that I can't do anything."

Kaz rises sharply, his plate in hand. "Tell your classmates what your life is like and see if they think you can't do anything. While you're at it, think on the benefits of being bored and alive." He joins Inej at the sink without meeting her eyes, and it's in the same silence that she steps away.

She knows they've been blessed with how relatively well-behaved Jordan is, but even though Jordan isn't her biological child, they share an adventurous spirit that can't help being stifled here in the city. Inej shuts her eyes, sends up a wordless prayer. She's trying so hard to be happy here. She wants this to be the life of her dreams. It's not like she has abandoned her cause, and she knows even if Jordan doesn't that going to school is important. It's just—her heart refuses to settle. Even when it would be safer to.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a note from the piano. She looks over, realizing that she's stopped in the middle of the hall, and crosses into the living room, where Kaz is sitting on the piano bench, picking at the keys. Slowly, Jordan creeps in from the kitchen to stand at the end of the piano and watch.

"That sounds like a song we learned in school," she says, and starts humming.

Kaz looks up and plays the same chord again. It meshes with the notes. Jordan pauses. He nods at her to carry on, and this time, plays to match her.

“It’s something about a bird. I don’t remember the words.” Jordan frowns.

“Just keep going,” Inej says softly.

Jordan looks back at her and nods, grinning. She turns her full attention back to Kaz and picks up humming again; he plays along, slowly at first, but more steadily as the song goes on. Inej goes to stand at the other end of the piano and watch.

“I didn’t know you knew this one,” she says. “Or how to play, to be honest.”

“Oh, don’t be honest,” says Kaz, apparently settled enough in the rhythm that he can divert some attention from the chords. “And there are only so many Kerch folk songs.”

Inej folds her arms on top of the piano, rests her chin on them, and watches—Jordan swaying back and forth on her feet as she hums proudly, Kaz putting his trickster hands to a perfectly innocent use. Inej thinks of singing with Nina on the *Ferolind,* of round after round of out-of-tune shanties with her crew clustered around a lantern. Of family.

Even on solid ground, the house is full of music.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan visits the university and finds an old friend.

Chapter Notes

I love how suspicious everyone was of the fluff in the last chapter. I've trained you too well.

Shout-outs~

wicked333, an adventurous child forces the parents to have some adventures too ;)

KiwisAndTea, I do love being in a space with Kanej where I can play with their relationship a little more and explore what it's like when established.

Raphale, one constant about Jordan is that even if she doesn't understand, she'll do pretty much anything to make her da happy.

thephonyqueenofengland, I figured they deserved some softness <3

megbuch, angst? me? I would never.

andyoudoctor, I'm so happy that I finally get to write Jordan being grossed out by her parents. It's something every child should go through.

peppermintfae, sometimes all that you need is some secret domestic fluff <3

kanej_13, nothing to be scared of...at least, not in this one...

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, you don't need to wait anymore! welcome to the fic <3

Andhehe, I do love this family a lot <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ketterdam looks its best from above. Jordan agrees with Inej on this one. From her perch behind a gargoyle on one of the libraries of the Boeksplein, the cobbled streets of the university district wind beneath her like the footsteps of rambling children. Its buildings cluster together, flowers spilling from the window boxes, roofs calling her to make the leap.

For a moment, ink and herbal scents mask the smoke and port-town salt wind that usually drown the Ketterdam air.

Technically, she and Simon are supposed to be doing what's basically people-watching—confirming Kaz's theory that a Mr. Van Holst is entering the Ostrich at the same time each day. Simon is indeed at the Ostrich, but Jordan has her own interests to attend to. She'll laugh if Kaz tries to fault her for *that.*

Some students are sitting together on the rim of the fountain, reading a book together, sharing a scarf. Jordan pulls a face. She still thinks that stuff like that is gross; Maia has been on about boys since they both turned thirteen, but if she ever gets a crush on Lewies, Jordan is going to put her foot down and make her snap out of it.

At least Kaz and Inej aren't so bad about that sort of thing. It seems like it's hard for them. Jordan doesn't fully understand, but she accepts it because it's all she's ever known—if she wants to give a hug or anything like that, especially to Kaz, ask first. Sometimes it's a good day and sometimes it isn't. She knows it's a good day when her parents start being gross and flirting.

When she complained to Maia about this, Maia just said that of course they were flirting because they were crazy young. Jordan doesn't know about that. Some other people's parents are weirdly old, in her opinion. She'd much rather have parents who can teach her to climb and fight people.

Another student comes into the courtyard through one of the wrought-iron gates, a satchel slung over his shoulder. He has blond hair, curly, lots of it, and a steaming cup in one hand. That reminds Jordan, maybe she can nick some money off of someone while she's out here and go get a hot chocolate. She's not good enough yet to cut the middleman and swipe the hot liquid itself.

The students aren't what she's looking at, though. It's been well over a year since she last heard from Alby, but Thea was down by the docks a few days ago and saw a ship come in from southern Kerch; she'd been going on about how she was confused because one of the passengers she saw looked Kaelish, not Kerch.

It's a long shot, Jordan knows that, but what does she have to lose? Out of the blue, he just stopped writing, and he's going to answer for that. Simon can handle himself. Jordan has a score to settle.

She doesn't know for certain that he'll be here or that it'll be today, but she *does* know that the university is running tours today, and that Alby's dad is too paranoid to let him come to Ketterdam as a tourist. If he's paying for a tutor for his kid, then he'd probably pay to send his kid to the best university in Kerch—but not without making sure that it *is* the best, first.

The gargoyle is carved into the shape of some beast eating an apple. Jordan steps on one of its thighs in order to boost herself up to crouch on its bent shoulders. She is wearing mottled brownish-gray, not comfortable or nice-looking but unquestionably practical. The oncoming autumn merits her braid being tucked under a dull headscarf.

From up here, she can see past the Boeksplein all the way to Speaker's Bridge. There's a tour group coming. Jordan rises into a precarious, almost kneeling position, her chest braced against the back of the gargoyle's head, her heart pounding against the stone. The group's smallest member is red-haired, looking like a match amid the brick and cobbles.

Jordan slides down off of the gargoyle's back to the flat portion of the roof. There's a twisting iron gate at the back of the library, but in order to get to it, she has to flatten herself to the roof and slide her legs back over the edge until she's hanging by her fingertips, toes linked into the channels between the brick. There's hardly anything to grip, but she can't lose him. Jordan clings to the wall and works her way down to the top of the gate, which she easily shimmies down, then slips her hood off once her feet touch the ground.

The jacket she wears over a black vest is reversible, sea-green on the inside; she turns it around, then reverses her headscarf too, revealing it to be ivy-patterned and pulling it low over her brow.

She steels herself before rounding the corner to the front of the library. She'll never forgive herself if she backs out now.

When she enters the courtyard, Alby is standing with a student guide and a woman she doesn't recognize, reading a placard by the fountain. And it is him; his face might've gotten more angular, and he's at least started to grow into his limbs, but Jordan still knows him.

She climbs up the steps to the library doors and stands just inside them at an angle, able to see him but not necessarily be recognized. Then, after a moment to gather herself, she's back out again, her shoulders hunched and her head bowed as she shuffles up to the tour group. "Excuse me," she says, pitching her voice a little higher. "I'm—um, my big brother is a student here—but you don't care about that, probably…uh…" She puts a slight waver into her voice before going on. "I wanted to—to ask for a book, from the um, the library, but I'm scared. And you looked my age, so I…" Just for the effect (and to further hide her face), she lets her head hang even lower.

Alby looks back at his tutor, who is talking to the tour guide about the fountain's history, neither of them watching. "Okay," he says. "I'll help you."

You always do, Jordan thinks, trying not to smile even though she is *really* proud of herself.

She trails behind Alby all the way into the library, right up until she's able to close the doors behind them. Then she grabs his arm and drags him behind a bookshelf.

"Hey! What are you—"

Jordan pushes him against the bookshelf, her hands braced at his shoulders. He has gotten stupidly tall already. "Quiet," she whispers, unable to keep herself from smirking. "We're in a library."

"I don't care," Alby says stubbornly, trying to squirm away from her. "I'll scream."

Jordan pushes the scarf back from her face and looks him in the eyes. "No you won't."

For a second, Alby just stares at her. Then he starts to open his mouth, and Jordan can already feel what's happening. She takes him by the arms and whirls him across the narrow passage, pinning him to the wall with her forearm across his chest and her hand over his mouth. This has brought them closer than they were before. Jordan's heart is beating so hard that if she gets any nearer he'll probably be able to hear it.

Something wet and slimy brushes across the palm of her hand. "Eww!" Jordan instinctively draws back, but pins her hand back to Alby's shoulder before he can wriggle away. "Did you just *lick* me?"

"And it worked," says Alby, jutting his chin. "My father was right about you." His voice cracks on the end of *you.* Jordan laughs at him, but she stops when she realizes what he said.

"You told him about the letters?"

"No," says Alby. At least he's not fighting her as much as he was a minute ago. "He saw me reading the last one and lost it. Said I couldn't write to you anymore. What's the Crow Club?"

Jordan freezes and almost lets go of him. "What?"

"The thing you wrote on. It was a flyer for something called the Crow Club."

"None of your business," Jordan says automatically, trying to think fast. *Stupid baby me.* "But you stopped writing because he *told* you to? Dummy."

Alby stares at her. "Yeah. And don't call me a dummy."

"You don't do that," Jordan insists, pushing the heel of her hand harder into his shoulder. "You sneak around him."

"Anyone I could've gotten to send the letters was working for him," Alby protests, wriggling back, trying to get away from her grip. It doesn't work, of course. "Miss Irene will have noticed I'm gone by now."

"Miss Irene can cope," says Jordan, but she lets up the pressure a little.

"My da would never send me back here if he knew I already got attacked," Alby complains.

"This isn't *attacking* you, dumb-dumb." Jordan grins, showing all of her shiny new grown-up teeth. She leans nice and close to whisper in his ear. "But mess with me again and you'll see what is."

When she steps back and finally lets Alby go, the freckled apples of his cheeks are bright red. With fear, Jordan assumes, very proud of how scary she's being.

Alby is just standing there. She's scared him speechless, she thinks, delighted. Finally, he says, a little weakly, "I told you not to call me a dummy."

“I didn’t,” Jordan replies, tucking her braid back into her headscarf and pulling it back up. “I called you a dumb-dumb. It’s different. Are you going to get hot chocolate while you’re here?”

“I…didn’t know there was a place for it,” says Alby, who is still not moving.

“Well, you’re going now,” Jordan proclaims, starting for the door.

Alby blinks. “Why?”

“Because I’m going.” She wraps her arms around herself again. “And I’m very shy and will need help ordering.” She gives him an extra-sneaky wink, which Kaz would not approve of, but Kaz isn’t here.

So, yes, she’s going to have to explain to Simon and Kaz where she’s been, but Jordan thinks it’s high time she got into some trouble. She has a legacy to follow up, after all. And she can almost smell that hot chocolate now.

Chapter End Notes

thinks about that part where Kaz leaves the heist to go after Rollins yeah. yeah.

also, since we're a good bit of the way in now—please let me know if there's anything I need to fix or could be doing better! I want to make this entire reading experience worthwhile and enjoyable <3

(psst. go drink some water.)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Jordan comes back and finds herself in trouble.

Chapter Notes

I am back (and better than ever, hopefully)! I won't keep this chapter from you any longer, so let's do some shout-outs~

Raphale, you think they're going to be mad, eh? We'll have to see...

hardly_a_ghost, I adore how Jordan takes after them so much despite not being their biological daughter.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I LOVE YOU for pointing out the "I can help you/I'll help you" because it was not entirely intentional and now I am so proud of myself and my readers <3

KiwisAndTea, it was high time we got these kids back together....at least for a little while.

thephonyqueenofengland, I had him hidden in the tags for *so long*, waiting for someone to notice XD

BrilliantOmega, fear not, it's not going to be quite as tragic as Romeo and Juliet.

LeoLou, big reveal asked and answered ;)

the_purple_duck, Jordan is full of surprises, isn't she?

andyoudoctor, I really don't think Jordan thought through how she was going to explain this to Kaz XD

wicked333, what would you expect from this little crow but trouble?

Emzigale07, Jordan would like to hide things from her parents, but they happen to be in the information business, so...

schemingface, RIP university campus indeed. It can't catch a break from these crows.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first sight, the attic of the Slat doesn't extend over Kaz's office. Even at second and third sights, for that matter. But that does not explain how Inej has come to be perched comfortably in the rafters over his head, an apparently solid wall separating her from the rest of the attic. Indeed, that doesn't explain it, and Inej isn't planning to. Kaz knows, anyway.

He also knows precisely where she is, despite the fact that he hasn't looked up in the fifteen minutes she's been here. With his memory, he has never needed to do paperwork, and she suspects that he's taking some refuge from the crowd and noise out on the main floor. Betje is telling the (no doubt embellished) story of how she single-handedly beat off three Black Tips, spurred on by a rowdy audience that is probably more interested in her tight leather corset than her worth in a fight. Inej sincerely wishes that after all this time, Kaz would have trained his men better, but then again they're doing nothing but watching—a miracle in the Barrel.

Inej halfway pities the Black Tips. They've been practically treading water for the last five years from what she's heard, never filthy rich to begin with and now being smothered by the Dregs. She wonders, at times, how far Kaz will go—if one day he'll have crushed all the upstarts, merged the Staves, made Ketterdam his city. Made the Dregs synonymous with the Barrel itself. If she were still acting as the Wraith in her old capacity, she wonders if he'd have done it already.

She looks down over his shoulder from where she's seated on the exposed beam. The document he's looking over bears the seal of a Mr. Van Holst—a man from a moderately prosperous family who moved to Ketterdam from further inland a few months back, evidently wanting to try his luck at the Exchange.

"Mid-life crisis," says Kaz, his rasp dry and vaguely amused. That always means something.

"Seems to have succeeded for him," Inej replies. She knows enough about the situation to have seen the figures Van Holst is making.

"The Exchange is doing nothing more for him than it's done for anyone else," Kaz replies, setting the papers aside. "Van Holst is making it work for him. One of the *stadwatch* guards caught him sneaking around the shipping offices after hours. Think he's wanting in on the business?"

Inej smiles slightly at the private joke. When she was first preparing to embark on the *Wraith* 's maiden voyage, she'd frequently broken into those same offices for any records and useful documents she could get her hands on, occasionally bringing something worthwhile back to Kaz. It's been a while since she's thought of those nights, slipping in through his window unannounced to find him invariably awake, tossing theories back and forth with their heads bent close over some diagram or other. They were such children, she thinks now, taking on the world because there seemed to be no other choice, loving each other so fiercely that they hadn't even understood it.

"A change in careers would support your diagnosis," she says, looking up to the paneled ceiling that slopes just over her head. "But why did the guard tell you instead of his supervisor?" She's playing the game with Kaz, letting him boast a bit. He's smart enough to

know that she's humoring him. Besides, Inej knows that although he keeps his distance from the bruisers and brawlers who would gladly share his victories, he secretly takes a certain pride in telling her.

"I can't tell you everything, Wraith, or he'd be in your pocket and not mine," says Kaz, and even though his face isn't turned to her, Inej can picture the exact, slight smile he's wearing.

She knows she's taking a risk, even being here; it would be far too dangerous to Kaz and Jordan for this city to know that she's returned. They remain in an odd sort of limbo in his world, Kaz with his gloves on, calling her Wraith, the veneer of business over a comfort with one another that can't be disguised. Still, Inej knows that the second that doorknob turns, it will be as if she was never here.

"So Simon and Jordan were meant to see who Van Holst is squealing to," Inej surmises, glancing over towards the attic wall. Another cheer rises from outside the office door. "Shouldn't they be back by now?"

"So they should," says Kaz, looking over at the door. "And Simon is."

Inej freezes on the beam. Not looking down at Kaz, she says slowly, "Jordan never came back?" She fights down an urge to leap onto the table and interrogate him. They've been building so much trust these past four years—more, if she really thinks about it. That's not something she wants to let fall to a hasty reaction.

"According to Simon, she ran off nearly as soon as he was in position," says Kaz, shuffling the papers as if he's not concerned or paying attention. Inej knows better, however; when Kaz is calm is when one ought to be worried.

Pulling answers from him is like pulling teeth. She takes a slow breath. "Do you know where she is?"

Kaz nods to the office door. Looking at the top of his head, it takes a moment for Inej to realize what he means, but in that moment she's already secreted herself among the beams—just in time for the prodigal daughter to open the door.

The official story is that Jordan is another one of the little spiders. Still, they like for her to avoid the Slat in case people start asking questions. Jordan, however, seems to be deliberately ignoring what her parents like. She takes a look at Kaz's face and frowns at what she finds there. "Simon ratted me out."

"Simon brought back useful information," Kaz replies, folding his hands on the desk. "I didn't ask after dirt on you as well as Van Holst, but let's say he brought back a bonus to show that he cares about his job."

Inej will let him handle this. It's his world that Jordan is playing in, after all. But if he forgets that he is her father and not her boss, Inej will be happy to remind him.

"I don't work for you," says Jordan, crossing her arms defiantly.

“Not after this, you don’t,” Kaz replies, slowly spinning his pen through his fingers, watching it turn. His voice is light, level. Anyone who has so much as heard of him knows just how dangerous that is.

Jordan scowls, looking remarkably like him as she does it. She looks over her shoulder at the closed door as if she might just leave, but Inej knows she won’t. True to form, she looks back at Kaz, her brow set. She’s not changing her mind now. “I had a score to settle.”

Oh, for Saints’ sake. Now there are two of them. Inej is suddenly grateful that she and Kaz haven’t been able to actually have children, because she has the feeling that they would be insufferable.

Kaz holds his position, but Inej senses his interest. Personally, she hopes that he doesn’t give in; Jordan could stand with some scolding. Of course she would have picked up Inej’s own strong will and free spirit as well.

“All right, then, what was so important that you left the stakeout?” Kaz questions, leaning back in his chair, the pen still spinning. Inej maneuvers her way across the beams to sit against the attic wall, allowing herself a better view of what is happening below.

“I told you,” Jordan says stubbornly. “I had to get back at someone.”

“If you had told me what I wanted the first time, I wouldn’t have asked again,” Kaz says sharply, setting the pen down. The motion is not hasty, but it is sudden. Inej doesn’t like the way that this is going.

“Maybe I don’t have to tell you,” says Jordan. While Inej half-admires her tenacity, she does wish that Jordan would learn to pick her battles. That’ll be a conversation for another day.

Kaz arches an eyebrow, and with the slow inevitability of a falling building, he leans forward to brace his forearms on the desk. Jordan takes a step back. Inej rises into a crouch, ready to stop this.

Kaz, however, is smiling slightly. Inej wonders if Jordan knows enough to be afraid of that smile. “Technically, that’s true,” he says. His cane is leaning against the table beside him, and he takes it in one hand. “But I’ll know if you lie. And if you don’t tell me, you’ll tell your mother.”

Inej finds herself rather mollified to be used as a threat. And while it will be a trickier business with her daughter, Kaz isn’t wrong; it’s been her business for as long as they’ve known one another to gather secrets, after all.

Jordan seems to realize this, judging by the way that her scowl is creeping towards a pout. She looks to the window, but Kaz gives the barest shake of his head. Finally, bitterly, she says, “It was that pen pal assignment from school. He never wrote back. And I heard from Thea that he might be in the city.”

Has she learned nothing? She’s skipping out on a stakeout to chase down a stranger? Inej readies herself to intervene, but she will see what Kaz has to say first.

He has gone very still. It permeates the room, and even Jordan has frozen.

“And who is this?” Kaz asks, his voice dropping dangerously quiet.

Jordan stares back balefully, but after a few moments her shoulders round, her head droops. “His name’s Alby,” she says quietly. “He’s at least part Kaelish. Other than that—I dunno.”

Inej drops down onto the desk, her memory whirring. Jordan gasps and takes a step back, but Inej isn’t paying attention; she’s staring into nothing. She knows where she’s heard that name before.

“Inej?” Kaz looks to her. She doesn’t know when she has changed from co-parent to his partner in interrogation, but she’ll be whatever she has to be to keep their daughter safe.

She swaps from a crouch to sit on the edge of the desk, looking Jordan fully in the eyes. “Do you know his last name, Jordan?”

Mutely, the girl shakes her head. As much as Inej has been marveling lately about how grown-up she is, she now looks like such a child.

“Why?” Kaz questions impatiently from the background. Inej knows how much he hates not having all of the information, but this time he might have to learn how it feels to have someone keeping a stranglehold on the answers. “Inej. Do *you* know?”

“I might,” Inej murmurs. If she speaks it into reality, she knows how Kaz will react—he’ll put up a fortress, go on a warpath, lock Jordan away as he chases the fight Inej wants him to be free from. But if she says nothing, and she’s right, and that puts Jordan in danger…

She can manage Kaz. She cannot be responsible for her child getting hurt, not again. “Alby is Rollins’ son’s name, Kaz.”

The atmosphere in the room shifts. The air seems taut with the sound of Rollins’ name.

“Who?” Jordan asks, looking back and forth between them.

Kaz’s eyes are fixed somewhere beyond Inej and Jordan, somewhere beyond the wall they appear to be locked on. “This wasn’t just for school, Jordan. Where did you actually meet him?”

“It was!” Jordan insists, backing up towards the door. “I don’t know why you’re questioning me like—”

“Because you’re clever enough to stage an ambush, and yet you’ll go around trusting anyone who seems kind!” Kaz snaps, his voice still low and taut.

“I will not,” Jordan shoots back with a stamp of her foot. She crosses her arms and glares at Kaz with a terribly familiar expression. “He helped me get back home when I was running from those slavers.”

“People will help you with aim to harm, Jordan,” says Kaz, his voice rising impatiently. He stands up and paces behind the desk. “In this city alone—”

“I know,” Jordan says coldly. “It’s what you do. It’s how you make your money. I’m not stupid.”

“Then will you *stop* acting like it?” Kaz plants both hands on the desk, restraint trembling in every line of his frame. But he’s not looking at Jordan anymore—he is staring down at the tabletop, at nothing. Inej slips off of the desk, ready to intervene—this feels dangerous. Kaz is holding himself back, but she can feel that she’s losing him to the black tide, to a place neither she nor Jordan will be able to reach.

It is the place Rollins always takes him. There’s a reason that Inej ensured for herself that Pekka Rollins would stay out of their lives—she knows what Kaz becomes because of him, and when they have finally started to build something together, she refuses to lose him again.

“I’m not acting like anything!” Jordan says, her volume rising too. They’re feeding into each other. “But I’m not going to be like you!”

Inej turns sharply to her. “Jordan, that’s enough—”

“And just what the hell does that mean?” Kaz demands.

“Kaz—”

“It means you’re scared of everything! This whole city is scared of you, and you won’t let me take two steps outside my front door!” Jordan rakes a hand through her hair and stares at Kaz, the sort of defiance in her eyes to tell that she’ll die on this hill if she has to.

“I did,” Kaz snarls, leaning forward, his jaw tight. “I did, and you pulled this. *That’s* why.” Dirtyhands never raises his voice. This man is frightened. But Jordan doesn’t know that.

“So I have friends!” Jordan flings her arms into the air. “So what? Not everyone in this city is trying to kill me!”

“Jordan,” Inej starts, “I don’t think that—”

“You think you’re clever enough to take on this world alone. Well, you’re not,” says Kaz, standing very still, his breathing shallow. Inej watches his chest rise and fall and fears what he isn’t saying.

“Sometimes people are just nice!” Jordan insists. She turns and puts a hand on the doorknob. “I can handle myself and—”

Inej starts after her. “Jordan—”

“You’re a *child*—”

Jordan looks like she’s going to cry. “I am not! I’m almost thirteen and I—”

“Damn it—Will you *listen* to me this time, Jordie?”

Inej goes still. The entire room does, it seems. Her back is to Kaz, but she doesn’t turn to face him; she just sighs, lets her hand fall.

It’s so quiet. A moment ago, she couldn’t hear herself think, and now—she almost wishes she couldn’t. Dust swirls in the shafts of pale light through the window, the only sound the noise of Kaz’s shaky breaths. Inej shuts her eyes and forces herself to breathe, too. It still sounds like that clock tower.

When Inej looks again, Jordan has let go of the doorknob. She slowly turns around, all the anger gone from her expression. Her features twist in confusion, eyes filling with tears, and her voice quivers when she says, “You’ve never called me that before.”

Then Inej does look at Kaz. His hands are still braced on the desk, but now as if they’re the only thing holding him up. His eyes dart across the desktop, unfocused, and he’s shaking. “...What?”

“Jordie,” says Jordan, and Inej swears that she sees Kaz wince. Jordan sniffs and scrubs at her eyes. “You’ve never called me that before.”

Kaz doesn’t answer, still staring into nothing.

All right, she’s taken long enough to intervene. Inej sets a hand on Jordan’s shoulder and steers her back towards the door. “Go home, *meja.* This isn’t over, but…”

Jordan casts a worried look at Kaz before she leaves, her eyes still red. She is so brave, Inej thinks, which is a hard thing to be as a child who needs protecting. “No. I know.”

The door falls shut with a groan that rings through the space like a bell. The office suddenly seems much emptier.

Inej crosses to the desk. She doesn’t say anything. Kaz sinks into the chair, one hand over his eyes.

She doesn’t like standing over him like this.

“She would…” Kaz moves his hand away from his eyes, runs it through his hair. “She’d have his address.”

“Kaz. No.” Inej sits on the desk, her legs hanging to either side of him. “You can’t go after him.”

He looks up at her, his eyes black, pupils wide. “I can, and if—”

“Don’t tell me that you couldn’t have gone searching for him in all these years,” Inej says sharply. “Or that he couldn’t have found you. You have your empire—and his, for that matter.” She leans down, lifts his chin with the lightest brush of her fingers. He flinches away at first, but then looks her in the eyes. “Let that be enough.”

Kaz's eyes are wary, dim in the backlight from the window that limns his face. "Don't tell me that he won't come for Jordan if he knows."

"He won't," says Inej. "Before I ever set sail, I left him a scar to remember me by. And promised another if he cared to come for it."

Kaz's lips part slightly, but nothing escaped them besides a slow exhale. Once again, he rakes a gloved hand through his hair. "Inej…"

"Lord what you have over him, if you must. Just don't become what he makes you. I don't miss that man." Inej offers him her hand, and he takes it; she gives it a gentle squeeze, even through the leather.

Kaz leans back in the chair. He looks exhausted, and Inej knows that she's won—at least for now. But the temptation will remain for him, and they'll all have to be on their guard.

Inej tightens her grip on his hand, leans forward, and brushes a kiss across his lips. Kaz gives a quiet groan, his eyes still shut after she pulls away.

Inej smiles softly to herself. She stands on the desk, preparing to go back the way that she came. "I'll talk to Jordan," she says. "Sleep, if you can."

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, this is why I was cackling when you all thought the letters would be where the angst was coming from. Personally, I think that red herring was very "tell him you're going to steal his watch" of me. Anyway. Feel free to yell at me in the comments ;)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej and Kaz break into a jewelry store. But maybe that's not all it is...

Chapter Notes

I just got the floaty comment box extension (~not sponsored~), and my skin is clear, my crops are watered, and authors the world over are about to love me. you should all get it.

speaking of comments, it's shout-out time~

ladysapphinope, that encapsulates the whole chapter very nicely.

KiwisAndTea, I also miss that angry little guy sometimes. If I ever have time to write fic outside of this monstrosity, maybe I'll do some canon-era stuff.

thephonyqueenofengland, I don't envision them telling her all of what happened, at least not until she's a little older, but rest assured that it is going to be addressed, just...not today. we've got places to be and people to see.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I do love me some parallels. and it's going to be very interesting to see Jordan growing up and forming her own opinions, which also means that she's there to call her parents out on their unhealthy nonsense. I can't wait to use that some more.

kanej_13, hopefully this chapter (or more likely the next one) makes you like me again : (

cameliawrites, I am so excited for kanej dealing with a teenager, because they are completely out of their depth, especially Kaz.

andyoudoctor, as much as I love Jordan being a lot like Kaz, it also does mean that they're going to clash.

wicked333, thank you so much for pointing that part out! I love when people mention their favorite lines <3

Andhehe, gotta have an emotional rollercoaster once in a while.

slsgirl, thank you so much!! <3

LeoLou, see, I try to balance angst with making you all like me, but...the angst usually wins out. XD

pancakes507, why must you choose? "loved this *and* suffered because of it" is about the reaction I expected, XD

ThatUselessHuman, let's see if we can get you to acceptance in the next few chapters...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the hours before dawn, as the bustle fades from the Staves, Ketterdam is almost quiet. The noise and raucous crowds are ushered back to hotels and shoddy gang houses deep within the Barrel, and as the dockworkers begin their labor and the fishing boats disappear from the harbor's horizon, the shadows have their run of the place.

Above a jeweler's, which is located just far enough out of the Barrel to stay in business, one shadow in particular seems to be about its own business—as the Suli would say. If there were anyone around to notice, they might have seen this shadow step off of an otherwise empty boat from the canal and flit across to the line of storefronts, avoiding the lamplight as if it would burn.

Normally, such playfulness among the shadows means danger. Tonight, it is a woman who will only mean danger if she has to.

The jeweler's has only recently closed; in this part of the city, it's standard practice to stay open late, an attempt to deter thieves by having staff around and lights on. It seems to work, too, at least on those thieves who lack the patience of the Wraith.

She still isn't sure why Kaz called her here, she reflects as she finishes scaling the side of the building and steps onto the flat roof. A narrow chimney protrudes from it, emitting nothing now, but normally it would be adding to the smoky haze that forever wreathes her city. Inej crosses to it, her hood covering her head, the sky still a deep, murky blue through the smog. Kaz has gotten better over the years about telling her exactly what he's planning, but there are still times like this when she feels as if he's preying on her curiosity, luring her to a job with the hope of more answers.

Well, more fool her for following that lure, then. She's here, isn't she?

She hops up onto the rim of the chimney shaft and crouches there, estimating its depth. Chimney walking was one of the first things that she'd learned when she began traversing the roofs, roads, and canals of Ketterdam—the art of wedging oneself into a chimney or similar small space and using pressure to fight gravity. Well, when Inej isn't fighting the slavers, the Barrel bosses, and half the council, she might as well battle gravity on her off days.

She tips over the rim into the long, black shaft and catcher herself in position, her back against one wall and her feet wedged opposite. She'll be absolutely covered in soot by the

time she makes it down to the apartment nestled above the jeweler's shop; Kaz entrusting her with getting in means that he's also left it up to her to sort out that problem.

Inej isn't so much wondering if she's good enough to get in and use the sink as she is wondering whether or not it's worth her time. But she's going to have to pick at least one lock on the way down, and she doubts she could ever look Kaz in the eye if she left fingerprints on something.

She works her way down the chimney and swings to land balanced on the fireplace grate. A lantern casts a yellow pool of light over the sofa directly across from the fireplace, where a man—presumably the jeweler—lies asleep. Inej checks the knife sheathed at her forearm. She certainly isn't going to wake him up, but being this close still makes her uneasy.

If she wanted to not leave tracks, truly, the best way to do it would be to maneuver across the ceiling somehow. But she didn't have time to scout the interior before Kaz asked her to join him, and the Wraith is never without a backup plan.

She slips off her climbing shoes (thank you, Jesper); the slender top of the fireplace grate digs into her bare feet, but only as long as it takes for her to step silently onto the carpet and slip right past the apartment's sleeping owner. The space is small, the kitchen and sitting room undivided, so it's not much of a ways to make it to the sink. Inej tests the tap; she doesn't need it creaking or making too much noise. The water turns on with a soft, whispering rush; Inej glances back over her shoulder, but the man remains sound asleep.

She reaches into one of the pockets of her quilted vest and withdraws a deep maroon handkerchief that Kaz—well, he didn't give it to her, but he did allow her to take it from him. She wets it, then wipes the soot from her hands and the bottoms of her shoes before wringing out the handkerchief and putting it back into her pocket. Some droplets remain in the sink as evidence of her presence, but they'll have dried before she and Kaz even leave the shop downstairs.

Inej doesn't put her shoes back on until she gets to the top of the stairs, then checks to make sure they're clean and dry before she does so. No sense in leaving prints that she just went to all of that trouble to avoid. The door to the downstairs is locked—why lock it from the inside, she wonders—but even if she doesn't have Kaz's skill for breaking and entering (breaking and exiting, in this case?) it's not a difficult one to pick.

Inej is secretly delighted to see that the steep staircase is equipped with a banister, and she slides down it rather than walking; it's a childish pleasure that she's missed since moving out of the Slat. There's another door at the base of the stairs, and she has to stop herself before she hits it, but that doesn't diminish the joy of the thing.

After finessing this second lock, a bit more difficult than the first, Inej steps out into the store proper. Kaz is already behind one of the cases, working on one of the panels. He doesn't look up. "Hello, Inej."

She frowns slightly at him. "I thought I was your way in."

Kaz makes a face—evidently the panel isn't doing what he wants it to. "Did I say that?" It's a rhetorical question. Inej opts not to care.

She goes to the front desk to find the till, and preferably a safe while she's at it. "Why ask me, otherwise?"

Kaz twists something on the back of the case, which appears to be refusing to budge. "Can't a man enjoy your delightful company?" he says, although the annoyance with the panel that bleeds into his words damages the effect more than a little.

Inej exhales sharply through her nose and ducks beneath the counter. This one is mostly full of necklaces on velvet-covered stands, sapphires the size of a human eye and clusters of rubies like berries on a branch. The light on a statement collar of diamonds catches the corner of Inej's eye, and she startles, turning sharply to look.

It's just a necklace. Not even the same necklace.

Heleen left this city years ago, her supply dried up and her business floundering. If only she could get out of Inej's head so easily.

"Found something?" says Kaz's voice, the half-murmur that tells her he's still focused on something.

"It would help if you told me what we're looking for," Inej replies, straightening up to look over at him, though only the top of his head is properly visible above the glass case.

"I am looking for anything that could pass as worth more than it actually is. You are looking for trapdoors," Kaz replies, a note of satisfaction creeping into his voice as the stubborn panel finally gives.

Inej pauses. "Trapdoors?"

"I have it on the best authority that I can get without my Wraith on the streets that this place is a front," says Kaz, looking up over the top of the case as he reaches into the newly created gap. "An in-between for indentures fresh off the docks."

Inej rolls her eyes at the blatant flattery, even if she is a bit mollified by it. Getting outright compliments from Kaz is a new phenomenon, and one that she secretly enjoys, despite the fact that she can't help being suspicious of it— *all right, Kaz, what are you going to ask of me this time?*

However, she now has a mission, and she is professional enough to focus more on that than on a kind word from Kaz. Working behind the scenes and fighting the Councilmen and Barrel bosses on paper has its worth, but she misses seeing the faces of the boys and girls when they realize that they're free.

She takes to checking the walls, running her fingers along the join of the pale blue wallpaper. It's a more staid and reserved design than one might find any further south, running from the

ceiling to the top of the ivory wainscoting that, she assumes, serves to hide the seams of any hidden doors.

She traces the top of it, looking for a section that might pull away, and glances back over her shoulder at Kaz. He has done away with his wool coat tonight for agility's sake, though she'd think that he would find the pockets convenient; he is holding a display of ring up to the silvery moonlight through the window, evidently judging their quality. She'll leave him to that. Kaz is by no means a professional at appraising an item's actual worth, but he has a frustratingly good eye for how much someone will pay for it.

"Why here?" she has to ask, walking the length of the wall and feeling for loose floorboards. "The brothels that are left aren't so much further south."

"Window shopping," says Kaz, and when she looks back at him the display of rings has been mysteriously cleared. He slips something into his pocket, then moves to the next panel, feeling along the top, and she thinks briefly that there's an odd note in the tone of his voice. "Easier for the buyers to examine prospective indentures here than out on the docks."

Inej has the thought that they are being remarkably lax about this whole thing with the proprietor asleep upstairs, but for all she knows Kaz already accounted for him and didn't deign to tell her.

"It's trade," she says, a slight frown burrowing between her brows. She returns to the case and tests its weight. "The Kerch won't interfere even if it is happening in the open." That's a fact that she remembers far too well, and she has to pause to force down the memories of Heleen's hands on her.

"The Council won't," says Kaz, popping open the panel behind a row of drawers, "but the trade of indentures has been targeted by vigilantes lately. Makes their lives much more difficult."

Inej tries to suppress a smile, which is made easier by the thought still nagging at the back of her mind—he seems almost nervous. What else is he keeping from her? There are enough odd pieces about this whole job, and while she trusts Kaz far more than she used to…

The case won't budge, and she gives an irritated sigh. The ceiling is too high to hide anything up there, too. "Kaz," she says impatiently, "why do I feel like there is no trapdoor?"

"Oh, there is," he says, sounding distracted as he withdraws something from one of the drawers. "Best authority, remember?"

Distracted and—something else. Something that's setting her on edge. She knows Kaz well enough to know that he's stalling, but for what? Why with her? What's the play? "Kaz—"

He interrupts her, not verbally, but by flicking something off the top of his thumb as one might flip a coin. It sparkles at the top of its arc, and Inej automatically reaches out to catch it. It's small and cold in her palm.

When she opens her hand, one of his lockpicks lies there. She looks back at him in question.

“In the floor,” he says, bracing his weight against the case and shoving it forward. It makes a concerning amount of noise, but she knows that he wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t already considered that fact.

Inej joins him where he stands, and indeed a faint seam is visible in the floor where the case used to be.

“Do the honors,” says Kaz, with a slight lift of his brow.

Inej bends to feel for a hinge, but when she finds it and starts working away at it, the balance of the door feels wrong. “Move the case a bit further,” she says, and prays that he won’t make some comment about the fact that perhaps she just isn’t good enough to deconstruct the hinge.

Maybe her Saints are listening, because not only does Kaz make no comment, his thin white shirt flatters the muscles in his arms that are being put to work at the moment. Inej is too much of a professional to be distracted from her project, but that’s not to say she isn’t enjoying herself. Lockpicking is mostly done by feel, anyway.

“Far enough?” Kaz questions, pushing his hair back from his face. Inej is tempted to tell him to move it again, but there is serious business to be done. There are lives that need rescuing.

Finally, the hinge gives, and Inej pries the trapdoor open. The moonlight is dim through the windows, the streetlamps too distant to reach into this hold. But she hears motion, rustling, whispers. Whimpers of fear. Her heart knots.

“ *What language?”* she asks in Ravkan, the most common one for captives given the population of Grisha and the fact that most of the Suli know common Ravkan as well. Just in case, she cycles through other languages. “Kerch? *Shu? Zemeni? Kaelish? Fjerdan?* ”

Silence. They’re probably too afraid to answer. Inej mutters a curse, then looks to Kaz. “I need to get down there.”

His gaze is thoroughly unwavering. “Then go. I’m not going anywhere.”

She glances up to the ceiling over their heads. “What about him?”

“He’s been drugging his captives,” says Kaz, leaning his hip against the counter, presumably to take some weight off of his weaker side. “You’d think he would know what the stuff tastes like.”

Inej beams at him before taking hold of the edge of the ladder and lowering herself into the hold.

She has to twist so that she doesn’t hit anyone, and there are still muffled shrieks, some cut off presumably by one of the other prisoners. It’s cramped and crowded; Inej can’t see much by the barest sliver of light, and she doesn’t have a lantern, but she can certainly feel the people pressed against her. Her heart jitters against her throat. She checks her knives.

Continuing in Ravkan, she says, " *On your way here, did anyone tell you about a ship called the Wraith?"* She fears that her influence has faded with time, but it's the best way she knows to convince them that she is here to help.

To her surprise, a voice to her left speaks up, in thickly accented Kerch. "Yes. But that it was a ghost ship, like the name, not heard of. Not coming for us."

Inej turns her face towards where she thinks the girl who spoke must be. Her skin prickles. She needs to get them out of here, for her own sake as well as theirs. "I'm the captain of the Wraith. I can help you."

"Help?" someone else asks blankly, a boy's voice. He sounds nearer to her; Suli, and young. There's a slight slur, a delay in his voice that makes Inej remember what Kaz said to her just a moment ago. It helps to latch onto that concrete memory, instead of the ones that her mind threatens to sink back into.

She knows the practice of drugging indentures. It was never done to her. She learned fast. But she had seen it used on other girls—seen how placid and agreeable it made them. She hates the idea of using that to her advantage, but…

"Yes," she says again, "I can help you. Here." She climbs a few steps up the ladder and offers a hand down to whomever will take it, then repeats her words in Ravkan, then Shu, then Zemeni, and finally Suli. To speak her native tongue is a comfort in itself, and being raised slightly away from the crowd helps, too.

"But…we have to stay here…" the boy says hesitantly.

"You don't. But we have to be quick," Inej says. "Quick and as quiet as you can."

<><><>

"Are you sure they'll be able to find it?" Inej asks, watching the small band of boys and girls walk away. She and Kaz are standing beneath a streetlamp, just a few steps away from the apparently undisturbed jewelry store. The sky has gone from black to dove's-wing gray, the prelude to a sunrise glinting between the silhouetted buildings.

"They won't make it a street over before they're intercepted by a handful of Dregs," Kaz replies. "And if *they* don't know where our safehouses are, they'll be out of a job if not a limb."

"A limb?" Inej says skeptically.

The corner of Kaz's lips twists up. "Would *you* test it?"

Inej gives him a sideways look. The pale yellow light of the streetlamp gilds him and softens his edges. "Of course I would."

"Not a fair example, then," Kaz concedes, and she gives a satisfied hum of agreement..

For a moment, they watch the group disappear around a corner, leaning on one another’s shoulders, huddled against the oncoming dawn. Inej pictures herself and Kaz that way—blinking in the light that’s dazzling after being locked away so long, not knowing where they’re headed except that they will make it there together. On an impulse, she reaches for his free hand, brushing the backs of their fingers together; he takes it, making her slender fingers seem even smaller against the layer of leather cladding.

She should go home before the sun rises in full, go collect Jordan from Jesper and Wylan's, but she can't seem to make herself move. The world seems to be holding its breath, waiting for something, even the fog rolling in off the harbor gone still in the air. Hope lifts its wary head, and it, too, waits. "That wasn't all that you wanted from tonight," says Inej, her eyes trained on the slow blush of the sky. "What business, Kaz?"

“Inej,” he says, and his voice is different; not the confidence man, cocky and amused, not the master thief on a routine job, but instead the nervous boy who is about to offer her a piece of his heart. He slips his free hand into his pocket. “I have something else to ask you.”

Chapter End Notes

haven't done a cliffhanger in a hot minute so I figured we were about due for one of those. also, the conversation with Jordan stemming from the last chapter *will* be addressed, just not this week.

youtuber voice be sure to comment, subscribe, and SMASH that like button. just completely obliterate it.

anyway, the comments are open for conspiracy theories, criticism, kanej-related screaming, general screaming, debate...whatever you want to throw in there, basically. have a whole english class for all I care. maybe I'll hand out stickers.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz asks a question.

Chapter Notes

As eager as I'm sure you are to get to the chapter, first we have to do some shout-outs~

ThatUselessHuman, your gold star is well-deserved, and that resolution is coming at uh....some point. Probably the next Inej PoV.

the_purple_duck, the best surprises are the good ones, in my opinion.

KiwisAndTea, fear not, the (admittedly rude) cliffhanger is about to be resolved.

thephonyqueenofengland, yeah, he might need to work on his setup for....whatever he's about to ask....

whynotcherries, it is all rather exciting, isn't it?

Raphale, I do love a good power couple moment. They still got it.

wicked333, I'm afraid you've found me out...he's going to ask her for a new hat...I can't imagine how you knew.

toovrede, if you thought the last chapter was scream-worthy...

LeoLou, so much to say, but especially re: kanej being more comfortable with one another in all the ways! As much as Inej isn't entirely happy having to stay in the city, it's allowed them to build something in the mundane, something more than the stolen glances and life-or-death situations they were subsisting on before.

andyoudoctor, I actually loved all of these thoughts. Especially about the plot, because while I don't like plot, there's something to be said for the way that it adds depth to things.

kanej_13, please read the chapter before you decide to come and punch me ;)

Adriennezzz, would I hide spoilers in the notes? would I really? *would* I???

Sia, the new chapter is here, so please don't die!

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, SO MUCH TO SAY. I do have to say that Inej *is* setting an example via the banister sliding and absolutely would teach Jordan how. I do appreciate how you notice the web that I'm weaving re: keeping y'all on your toes, lol.

Princess_Zivaleh, fear not! More has arrived!

pancakes507, I hope you're back from that other planet by now, because the resolution is here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz Brekker can count the times he's been this terrified on one dirty, gloved hand. Speaking of the gloves…he doesn't want to let go of Inej's hand, so he withdraws the other one from his pocket, catches one of the leather fingertips in his teeth, and tugs the glove off. He chances a look at Inej; she's watching him with a look of patience, of—of approval, he realizes, heat creeping up his chest like he's some startled boy when he sees the slight hook at the corner of her smile.

There's soot smudged on her cheeks. The smile grows, and her eyes roam briefly over his face. Kaz reminds himself to breathe. This is ridiculous.

"Ask me," she says softly, lips barely parting. Kaz has the brief thought that kissing her is practically a comforting prospect compared to going through with this.

Pull yourself together, Brekker. He is, after all, the biggest bully in the Barrel, the one who fought and beat his own gang, Pekka Rollins, Jan van Eck, and damn near the Council of Tides at the age of seventeen. He's the one with stakes and contacts in the government of practically every nation, the one who could and would kill a man as soon as look him in the eye.

But that's not the man Inej wants. He's not the one who will be able to accomplish this. He is the one who was left to play an out-of-tune piano in the house that made him, trying to scrape together the pieces of the boy that he was.

If Inej accepts the ring that's secreted in his palm, she won't become a Brekker, but a Rietveld.

"Do you recall our friend Johannus Rietveld?" he questions. His voice sounds foreign to him, and far away. Normally he's quite the actor, an expert at the art of the ruse or con; between that fact and the magic, he'd thought more than once that in another life he might've had a calling on the stage. Now, however, to say the name feels completely different when Inej knows what it really means.

She's watching him, like she always seems to be. The light from the streetlamp makes her seem less real, somehow; gilded, made ghostly. "How could I forget?" she says, and gives his hand a slight squeeze. He doesn't know if it's for his comfort or hers, but he is glad for it.

There was a time—a very long time—when holding her hand, even with gloves on, wouldn't have come as a comfort to him. A tortured sort of joy, perhaps, a prospect of hope and revulsion in tandem, but not this—a strong, firm grasp that tethers him to the here and now, a place to rest that feels like home. With her as an anchor, he can go on. He can finish the story.

"The lease on his farm needs renewing," he says, meeting the question in her eyes and hoping that she will understand the answer. "Preferably done in person. And Lij being as small a town as it is, the one man who handles legal documentation can also perform marriages."

That's it, then. It's out in the air. He almost wants to close his eyes for fear of what he'll find in Inej's expression, but he is stronger than that. Stronger than all of this.

Why do it? He's turned the question over in his head a dozen different ways since he began even considering this idea. It's not as if there will ever be anyone else for either of them, so they don't need a slip of paper or a metal band to bind them together; and one day, he knows, one day sooner than he wants, she'll be back to the seas, regardless of what contract or vow may tie her to be with him. And then of course there's the fact that he is putting himself fully on the line, going all in when there's no hope of cheating or working the cards.

Legal benefits , he thinks drily, for what is not the first time. But that's not the full truth of it. He knows how tired she is of the in-between, of raising Jordan together but not, of living in a house that he only visits. There are things they still can't do that being married won't solve. But as much as Inej has an adventurer's spirit, there is a part of her heart that wants certainty. He saw it and tried to solve it the wrong way, last time. Now he is offering her some resolution in the best way that he knows.

He looks at her, really looks at her. It isn't hard. It never has been. The hard part has always been the looking away.

"You mean all of this…Kaz…" She almost looks afraid, he thinks, and he hates it.

She's looking for the trick, he thinks, for the crack in the con. She's looking for the part where it benefits him, the way that he usually would.

He turns the limp black glove over in his free hand, and the ring he stole lies in its place—the simplest of illusions, a transformation. The ring is gold, fine gold, woven in a pattern of vines with blossoms made of diamonds. Probably not wild geraniums, but he thought it would suit her—though the gold will look cheap in comparison once she puts it on. If she puts it on.

Inej pulls her hand from his, and for a moment his heart seems to freeze, but she only holds it out to him. For a moment he doesn't understand—why isn't she taking the ring?—but she's got that look in her eyes. It's the one he knows, one he's known from the bathroom of the Ketterdam Suite to the kiss in an empty warehouse. It's not asking for more. It's just reminding him of what he can do already. It makes him better. She makes him better.

That's why he wants this, he thinks. Because with Inej around, he has a reason.

He shifts the ring to hold it in his fingertips and slides it onto her finger, steadying her wrist with the opposite hand. Once, he would have done this through the faintest of touches,

lightning crackling through him at the slightest brush of their skin. Even now, his every nerve stands at attention, and he keeps his fingertips over the point where her heartbeat pulses against her wrist. They are solid only under one another's touch, their breath proving to their ears alone that they are alive.

The ring glitters in the streetlight. Inej draws her hand back towards herself, turning it this way and that, looking at it in disbelief. To be fair, Kaz can barely believe it himself. Finally, she looks up at him, and there's no mistaking the catch in his breath at the sudden meeting of their eyes. "I don't understand," she says, a breathlessness in her voice, as if the slightest wind might break it. "You want to take me back to Lij?"

He has for a while. The trouble as been less with the idea of Inej going, and more with the idea of *him* going back. Even buying his father's farm, he did through third parties and by mail. "I told you that I did," he says. "In that letter. It may have been desperate and ill-advised, but it was honest."

She takes a deep, careful breath. "Why now, then, Kaz? Why—why ask at all?"

That's the question he's been asking himself, Kaz thinks. He's never been much with words when it comes to her, but he's getting better. In everything, because of her, he's getting better. And that's it, isn't it? That's why. "Once, I asked you to stay," he says. "If not that, I wanted to be sure you'd come back."

She shakes her head, still looking at the ring. Some segmented part of his mind considers that they ought to get her a ring or chain to wear it on in case she needs to hide it. "You knew I would anyway. As long as it takes, you know I'll always come back."

There have been times that he hasn't been so sure. The last time that he tried this comes to mind. Kaz simply lifts a shoulder. He wishes that he could leave it at that, but she deserves more. He at least has to try. "You're my reason," he says, trying to make it sound as if that simple statement isn't flaying him open, leaving him raw for the world to see. Even still, his hands are shaking before the words hit the cool morning air. A part of him wants to leave, to forget the idea that he could take it too far. Better to just be what he is.

But this could be what he is, he thinks wildly, desperately. He hasn't lost every ounce of his recklessness, although he might've just used it all up.

Inej smiles, completely unabashed, and for a moment he thinks the sun has risen already. "I thought you didn't need one," she teases.

Kaz pretends to be annoyed while he waits for his breath to return to him properly. "Well, seeing as you don't like any of the reasons I'm offering you—"

Inej slides her hand back into his, the one bearing the ring this time. "It's tax benefits, isn't it? That's the real reason?" There's a mischief in her expression that deserves its own priceless painting. He'd hang that in his office.

Kaz furrows his brow in mock confusion. "Are there benefits? I hadn't even thought of it."

Inej laughs as she begins to lead him towards home, and he looks at her as if she personally hung the moon in the sky. He can’t help it. “That’s the laugh.”

Slowly but inevitably while they've been talking, the sun has been crawling above the horizon, turning the sky from dove's-wing grey to a blush of color. Now, as they walk home, matching each other step for uneven step, dawn has risen over the harbor.

Chapter End Notes

comments feed the author. I would love to yell to whomever will listen about kanej and dawn symbolism.

(@brekkerbybrekker on instagram has some lovely thoughts about that as well. you can also find me hiding out over there @fairytales_of_forever)

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej and Kaz arrive in Lij and dress for the occasion.

Chapter Notes

this chapter wasn't meant to turn out the way that it did, but the characters did what they wanted. and now that you're all eager to find out what *that* means, let's do some shout-outs~

ThatUselessHuman, here you go, here's your resolution (sort of.)

Book_Junkie007, one of my favorite things about them as a couple is the way that they fight so hard to build something together.

the_purple_duck, I very much appreciate the incoherent screaming. Also, speaking of "I love you"s...

gryffindor2010, I had that one in the works for a looooong time. Obviously he was going to steal the ring, because...it's Kaz.

thephonyqueenofengland, I love watching you guys try to predict what will happen next. you entertain me as much as I entertain you.

KiwisAndTea, please, I can hardly give you a break from being an emotional wreck, can I? As if.

cameliawrites, first of all, your comment was beautiful. Second of all, I can't help myself with the callbacks to canon; I see a chance and I take it.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I've started to really look forward to your comments because they're always so in-depth and thoughtful. I especially like the notes you made about the slow inevitability of it; it's like everything else about their relationship—nothing really comes as a surprise, but the beauty is in how it happens.

Raphale, you thought *that* was the fluffiest thing ever, wait until you see this one.

Princess_Zivaleh, I decided to be nice and hold off on the painful plot twists for a little while.

kanej_13, the figurative door is open ;)

andyoudoctor, nothing like a little kanej to send you off to sleep <3

wicked333, not sure he's adorable all the time...maybe minus the murder.

peppermintfae, there was so much meaning in that scream and I appreciate it.

pancakes507, credit to my sister for that one. I already had kaz simping over inej's laugh, but she suggested that I add in the direct callback.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the cart rolls to a stop and Inej opens the door, the first thing that she notices is the sunlight.

There's so much of it. The sky is open and clear and so bright that she almost has to squint, rid of smoke and fog and even clouds. The warmth seeps into her skin through the plain homespun she wore for the trip, and she is tempted to close her eyes and just soak it in for a moment.

Behind her, Kaz's cane hits the earth, and she hears him take in a sharp breath.

He wasn't lying when he said that Lij is small. She's not sure that this is even the town proper. The main street of sorts that stretches before them just packed with earth, not so much as stone-paved, and even in the middle of the day the few buildings that line it are quiet. She can't tell, in the sun, if the lights are even on.

To either side of the street, behind the buildings, are are sprawling fields—thick with the golden grasses of late summer, wildflowers poking out at their edges and springing up in any patch of earth that will allow them.

"If it were spring, the crocuses would be growing," Kaz says quietly.

Inej turns back to look at him. To the casual observer, his expression would seem as inscrutable as ever, but she knows better. There is a depth in his dark eyes that she has come to fear. He is standing terribly still.

The cart has left; one way or another, they're here now.

"We could come back," she says softly. Soft words, soft steps, not to intrude on his memories but to invite herself in and be beside him. "Maybe we'll bring Jordan next time."

The sun is as stubborn and steady as ever, but something flickers in Kaz's eyes, and the blink that he gives as his only response is slow. Since the day he called Jordan by his brother's name, Inej feels as if she has seen the way he used to be with her—reserved, tentative, frustratingly cautious. Her hand goes to the ring that hangs from a cord around her neck; he has been at war with himself, between his promises to her and the way that his brother still

clings to his back. She can only be his ally in the fight. She can't battle for him, and she never has. Even if this is as close as she's ever gotten to wanting to.

Jordan being old enough to understand now is both a blessing and a curse. Though Inej has at least told her who Jordie is, they both know that the rest is Kaz's to tell, and that frustrates her headstrong daughter to no end.

I did it too, Inej has told her, wants to tell her more. *I did the waiting. And one day, he told me.* She reminds Jordan as she has reminded herself: it's not just him. Make yourself someone worth trusting. And try to trust him back. That's the hard part.

But she's trusting him now, isn't he? Trusting that she won't lose him to these empty streets…

She shifts the bag that holds both of their things into her opposite hand, faces him fully, and reaches for him, her palm open. The bridge is his to complete.

It seems to wake him, in some part. He swaps his cane over to its usual side and takes her hand. That, at least, comes much more easily these days; it is so precious, when they have fought for so long, and while Inej doesn't want to push it, she can't help wanting to cherish every touch, every piece of his heart that he gingerly places in her hands. It's just that she has to remember to give her own pieces back. They're a pair of patchwork hearts, the two of them, exchanging shards and fitting together the puzzles of their broken places until her heart is as much his as it is her own.

The street is so empty as they make their leisurely way to the only inn that the town has to boast of. A few people wander in and out of the post office, what looks like a market, a shop selling odds and ends, but their conversations are quiet, their dress simple. The women wear hats with ribbons to shield their faces from the sun, and some still wear stained aprons as if they were in the middle of their cooking and forgot some ingredient or other. Inej doesn't match them, quite; her skirt falls to her calves with taller boots, her pearl-buttoned blouse is covered by a silk vest from her mother, and she has nothing over her hair, but she blends in better than she usually would.

"I feel as if we're playing at being normal," she says quietly, watching a man usher his son into the post office.

"It's just another con," Kaz muses, his thumb brushing up and down against hers. He, too, is dressed more plainly than she's ever seen him, except perhaps back in Ravka. Even if dressing like a mercher is a wicked joke to him, his tastes have always been more refined than the simplicity she sees him in now—a linen shirt with strings untied, gray trousers of rough wool, suspenders with brass clips. And, of course, no gloves. "We have plenty of skill for those, Wraith."

Inej gives an amused hum, swinging their joined hands gently. "So I'm the Wraith now?"

"It is easier to think of it as business," says Kaz, giving her an amused look. Still, there's something in his tone, a wire stretched too tight; she supposes that she should be glad that

he's trying, it's just—they know each other too well. She can sense what's beneath it, and it's setting her on edge.

When they reach the inn, Kaz releases her hand to open the door for her. Inej gives him a smile as she goes in. *Polite farm boy,* she thinks, but that's not an area that she wants to push.

The innkeeper is a woman perhaps ten years their senior, reading a book behind the desk in the otherwise sparse main room. Inej scans the room out of habit—three uncomfortable-looking chairs, and wide windows through which the sun streams in dust-speckled slats. A doorway behind and beside the desk reveals a staircase, presumably to the rooms themselves.

Kaz limps up to the desk, the *thunk* of his cane on the boards alerting the woman behind it. Inej will have to get used to people reacting to him, here, as they would to anyone else; her first instinct when she sees the woman's expression, pleasant and empty of terror, is to think that she's either a fool or mad, but—no. She just doesn't know. No one here does. No matter how intimidating he looks even in linen and loose hair, Kaz is just that to anyone who hasn't heard the legend of Dirtyhands.

Never before has she understood so well the importance that he places on reputation.

"What name is the reservation under?" the woman asks, setting aside the book she was reading and flipping through a ledger, its entries written in a mixture of handwriting.

Kaz hesitates before responding, "Rietveld."

The receptionist's hands go very still. Inej will have plenty of time later to think about the fact that her own first reaction is to reach for the knife hidden beneath her sleeve. But all that the woman says is, "A family by that name used to live here. Are you a relation?" She sounds curious, conversational. Wistful, perhaps. Maybe Inej is jaded, but she doesn't understand how someone can be so blind to the ratcheting tension in the room, like the air before a lightning strike.

"You could say so," Kaz says curtly, tightly. "May we have our key? *Please?"*

Inej has the distant thought that things really have gotten serious if he's using manners. She steps up behind him, unsure if to put a hand on his shoulder would help or harm.

The woman looks almost offended—that's new, too, Inej thinks: people not immediately ducking for cover when Kaz stops being friendly. Not that he's ever really friendly to begin with. The receptionist hands over the key, though, and Inej notes the precision with which Kaz takes it, not allowing so much as a brush of their fingertips. She's starting to wonder if these are growing pains, or if for him to come back just wasn't a good idea.

She still remembers, vividly, her first time going home. She remembers taking her parents back to the caravan, helping them find a farmhouse to rent while they waited for her to return. Her little cousins, some so young she'd never met them, had hidden behind their mothers' legs; even the ones she'd held as babies had peered out from the doors of their *vardos*, always keeping their distance, watching her like she was a ghost.

Always the Wraith. Ketterdam had made her into a creature of smoke and shadows, and it was a mantle that she couldn't shed even when she'd gone home.

She remembers seeing herself as a child, running between the wagons; thinking of that phantom little girl, squatting beside the firepit with her cousins or racing to the top of a tree. She wonders if Kaz sees that too, if when they walked down the street, he saw a little dark-haired ghost of a boy—or two: wandering around the shops, chasing one another through the fields thick with grass.

He leads them up the twisting staircase, Inej following patiently behind; she tracks his step, tries to gauge how much pain he's in. She's not sure why she does it or when she started, but it's a strange comfort to check in with him, knowing that even if he won't tell her how he feels, she can see it for herself. She convinces herself that he won't tell her because he's so sure that she already knows.

Their room is only a few doors down the hall. Kaz is still ahead of her, so he is the first to open the door and step inside; there's a window with two sets of curtains, one filmy, the other heavier and drawn back, looking over a dresser of sorts and a double bed covered with a patchwork quilt.

Inej's eyes move from the bed— *just one* —to Kaz's face. She doubts that he did this by accident. And there's no question that she trusts him enough to try. Still…that doesn't silence the fear stirring in her heart.

"You can put your bag down," he says quietly, his voice rougher than usual. He seems to avoid looking in the mirror as he unclips his suspenders from the roughspun trousers that he's wearing.

Inej sets her bag at the foot of the bed, then sits on the quilt and smoothes her braid over her shoulder. To be honest, she likes how simple, how much like the home of a friend this room feels; she has the sense that Kaz is almost afraid to like it, that the habit of trying to forget who he was here is proving hard to break. "Do you want to change and get the paperwork handled now? Or go look at the farm first?" she asks, twirling the ring back and forth.

Kaz pauses, rubbing his thumb back and forth across one of the buttons of his plain linen shirt. Inej can only imagine what he's thinking—how much he can tell her, how much he wants to.

What a choice—get married first or go look at the apple trees. But that makes the significance of each sound much less equal than it is. Does Kaz want to start by inviting her into his past, or into his future?

Finally, he seems to settle, with more decisiveness than is perhaps necessary. "Courthouse first," he says, and Inej recognizes *that* voice. It's the one he uses in the eleventh hour, when a job has gone a dozen kinds of wrong, but he's about to salvage it with a plan that will get them an even greater prize than they planned for. She used to think of it as pure confidence. Now she knows that it's for his team—that it's meant to make them believe in him, because only then does he, too, believe that they can pull it off.

Inej pushes herself up from the bed and bends to the case they'd brought, flicking the latches open and pushing up the lid. Kaz gives her a questioning look, but she carries on.

Everything is so neatly organized inside, which she knows is Kaz's doing—each item delegated to its row, seamlessly folded. Inej gives a slight, fond smile, and picks up a rolled-up black tie with a subtle gray houndstooth pattern.

Kaz glances at her, his shirt half unbuttoned. "Not the red?" he questions.

Inej looks back at the red tie he's referring to, embroidered like a damask duvet. "Too striking," she says.

Kaz arches an eyebrow, but doesn't question it. Instead, he finishes shrugging the linen shirt off and sets it aside. "Then I assume you'll say no to the black shirt as well?"

"Too much black," Inej muses, only half paying attention to what he actually said. Kaz has never wanted to be the kind of boss who runs his gang from behind a desk, and that is well reflected in the defined muscle of his form. She used to be embarrassed to stare, but these days she enjoys making him blush.

Right now, she is rewarded by a touch of pink creeping up Kaz's chest and the back of his neck, and he looks away to start fidgeting with something on the dresser. Inej's smile grows, her teeth catching her lower lip, and as she withdraws a crisp white shirt from the bag, she thinks that she'll have to tell Nina that she was right.

When she stands up, it only takes a step or two to cross and hand Kaz the clean shirt, setting his tie aside on the desk. He pulls it on over his shoulders, then pauses, his eyes moving to her face.

Inej looks at him in question. His hands have stilled, but he isn't saying a word.

She moves so that she's right in front of him, so close that his breath stirs the loose hairs around her face. Even with the years between them, something still leaps to life inside of her when they are this close—it's just that now, it feels *good.* She wants more.

She sets her hands to the top button, the one at the hollow of his throat, and fastens it. His eyes are fixed on hers still.

Softly, she dips her head towards her work, a breath away from tucking it against his chest and being folded into his arms. She slides each button into the opening sewn for it with deft, gentle fingers, every touch as light as when they tried to touch one another for the first time. She thinks of Kaz as she does it, of his slender lockpick's fingers, so easily agile, so gentle. Perhaps that's one of the pieces of him that is stitched into her heart, now.

She pauses, not yet picking up the tie that she set aside for him; slowly, his hands rise to settle at her waist, and she leans fully into him, hands folded against his chest, and for a moment they just stand there—holding one another, ever so carefully.

Kaz puts a finger to her chin, tilts it up to him; Inej turns her face to him like a sunflower to the light, and he is smiling, faintly though it may be. He brushes his finger along the line of her jaw and sweeps a few wispy hairs behind her ear, drops a kiss to her forehead.

Inej's eyes fall shut, and she says the only thing in her mind. "I love you."

When she looks up at Kaz again, his face is alit with surprise; it is such a fragile, precious thing, and she wants to steal it, hoard it away to examine later. There is so much light in his eyes. "Inej?"

Inej scoops up the black tie from the dresser and slings it over his shoulders, holding the ends, drawing him closer still. They are pressed together now, heart to patched-up piecework heart, and never once has she felt safer. She doesn't think she's ever smiled like this, with such childish abandon. "I love you."

It's nothing new. It has been the subconscious of all her thoughts, the undertone of everything she said, nothing she didn't already understand. It's just that…the way he treasures her made it take the form of words.

She begins tying his tie, but Kaz puts a shaking hand over hers, holding almost painfully tight. With an unsteady movement, he leans forward until his lips are almost to her ear and whispers, shakily, "I…love you."

Inej pulls back to look him in the face. "You didn't have to—"

Kaz looks like he's just won a fight, flushed all the way up to his face, eyes shining. "But I do." His smile stretches wider than she's ever thought she would see on him. "I do." There's almost a shyness about him that is so foreign, so beautiful. "Have to practice saying that."

Inej laughs a little. She wants to kiss him, but at the same time she doesn't want to push it, and then again they don't need that. Never have. "Right," she says, shaking her head, feeling almost foolishly excited, "because we're getting married."

"We are, aren't we?" Kaz looks almost embarrassed, but so—so happy. Inej feels partway as if she shouldn't recognize him, but seeing him like this doesn't feel like that. It feels like the sun has come out, throwing a new side of him into the light. They've made it to morning, albeit bruised and blinking in the brightness of it, but they're here.

She's still holding the ends of his tie, so she pulls the knot tight. "There," she says, and with a touch of mischief she adds, "And yes, your tie is straight."

Chapter End Notes

they weren't supposed to say that. this was just going to be the cute "helping each other get ready" trope. but inej had her own ideas, as she often does. also, now I really want to draw them with their patchwork hearts...

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Inej faces her own demons. Kaz meets a face from the past. They strike a deal.

Chapter Notes

Happy fic-iversary, everyone! As my present to you (besides the chapter), have some shout-outs~

Raphale, you described their relationship so perfectly—incredibly tense yet incredibly fluffy.

ThatUselessHuman, happy kaz for the win! It's such a delicate balance of not making him completely OOC, but...he deserves this.

Princess_Zivaleh, the heart is an arrow, and mine is aimed to hit you right in the feels. I don't know if that made any sense XD

Andhehe, sometimes you just need a fuzzy blanket in fic form.

KiwisAndTea, you know that I can't get through a single Kanej chapter without referencing canon. They just seem like the sort to do that.

thephonyqueenofengland, I do think that the vibes here recall the way they were when they were younger—that almost desperate excitement, the risk of it all. As comfortable as they've gotten together, I love seeing them like this, too.

whynotcherries, ding ding ding and a gold star to you for recognizing the book reference! That was just a little one that hit me hard.

andyoudoctor, you said it so well that those three words aren't so important for them...kind of like the marriage being almost a formality. They already know all of this and it's not as if there's going to be anyone else for them, it's just that it shows how far they've come to do it, to say it anyway.

wicked333, outsider perspectives on Kaz are my faves. I wrote a whole one-shot on that concept (plug plug).

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I really love what you had to say here because it's so right—as dramatic as especially Kaz can be, the really important things tend to happen for them in small and quiet ways, just like this.

toovrede, all the love! <3

pancakes507, why not breakdance and breakdown at the same time? ;)

It's always a hotel room, Kaz thinks. In his more foolish moments—or his most wise—he wonders if it's the temporary nature of them, the fact that they can fight their way to each other only in the travelers' places, the in-between spaces that don't belong to them.

But then again, they are a couple of thieves. What have they ever cared for ownership? They steal what the world hasn't given them, Kaz reflects, watching Inej put the ring from the cord onto her hand, feeling as if he's just pulled off a bluff, another impossible heist—look at the world saying he shouldn't have been able to, look at the bosses and the barricades that laughed. He flexes his bare hands and imagines wearing a ring of his own.

Inej pulls her bag up onto her lap and withdraws the accessories that she brought. She'd told him about how her parents wanted her to get married their way—silks and incense, henna and jewels. He hadn't said it, because he never seems to, but he'd thought that if doing it in a Suli camp meant that he got to marry her, he'd set off right there to find them a ship. But she'd said no, and the hate had risen again to meet him like an old companion when she'd whispered to him how she couldn't. How she would lose herself to the scents of oranges and spice, how the clothes of her people would drown her, how the mockery of her culture had left a stain that she didn't want him to carry.

For a moment, slowly choking the Menagerie in the ashes of West Stave hadn't felt like enough. If not for the ache in her dark eyes, he would have burned it down right then.

Instead, the dress Inej will get married in is much simpler than her parents may have wanted. It is white, at least; pearl-studded on the bodice, full in the sleeves, a second skirt pinned at her hip that recalls her pirate's garb. Kaz imagines that this is what those she's rescued see—an angel of white and bronze.

He feels safe. No, he feels saved.

There is a gleam where the light hits the planes of her face, the black river of her hair swept over one shoulder. She at least allowed her parents to send her some jewelry, gold earrings that she fastens into her ears and a delicate headpiece that glitters over her brow.

Kaz steps up to stand beside the bed, beside her. Then he looks at her properly—what was meant to be a short glance lingers.

Inej touches one of her earrings, looking almost self-conscious. She is so radiant that it makes something ache in his chest.

A small smile curls his mouth at the corner when she pulls a knife and sheath from her bag. "Wise."

“You did always say that I am that, if nothing else,” Inej muses, picking up the leather sheath. She leans down, reaching for the hem of her dress, and Kaz flexes his hands aimlessly. One of them goes to his tie. *Your turn, Brekker.* “I can…”

Inej looks slightly amused. “Help me?” She picks up the leather strap, currently empty of the blade, and passes it over to Kaz.

Leaning on the bed for support, never minding the way his leg complains, Kaz kneels in front of her; he hesitates, and Inej pulls up the hem of her dress up past her thigh so that he can put the sheath on.

He hadn’t realized where it was meant to go, he thinks distantly, facing the expanse of her skin. He hadn’t asked. He swallows, and his hands drift up her leg to stop just behind her knee, hovering over the muscle formed by years of climbing and fighting and running. He wants to press his lips to the line of muscle that climbs her thigh, to keep going, to…he wants to learn her, every line. He wants…he *wants.* Desire blossoms in him, heated and sharp.

Inej sinks her hands into the quilt, making some attempt to ground herself. “That’s…that’s far enough,” she says. Her voice sounds weak, breathy.

But in which way? Kaz’s hands are shaking with the urge to—to pull away, to keep going. Every brush of her skin is electric. He runs his tongue over his lips and wishes for hers. He fumbles with the sheath, manages to buckle it, and then…

Something is wrong. Too many things. Inej has finally met his eyes, and hers have gone empty.

“Inej?” The desire is gone, concern in its place. He’s lifted his hands too, but something is wrong, too wrong. She doesn’t answer. It’s like the life is gone from her, like she’s become a doll. He’s seen this before, he thinks. She’s so scared.

Guilt, the unwelcome stranger, crawls beneath his skin. “I’m sorry,” he says, pushing himself to his feet, and stepping back all the way to the desk, leaving her room. She isn’t breathing right.

Say you’re sorry.

For what?

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says, and it feels as wrong as everything else about this. His voice is not a kind one. It’s not meant for saying things like that.

He wants to curse himself. It doesn’t matter what it was, which small thing broke her; and he wouldn’t dare be frustrated, would he? That he can’t want the one he’s with? But it’s not as if she can choose. It’s not as if he didn’t know that if he made enough headway in picking the lock of his own mind, they would have to face hers.

Together. We’ll fight our way out together.

His words are harsh, cruel. He hopes that in knowing what he is, she won't hate a thief for stealing hers. "I can help you."

Her breath is running away from her, quick and shallow. She looks so desperate. "How?"

How, indeed. What can he do, other then be a mirror to her brokenness? What can he do, other than be her way out of the harbor?

He creeps back closer, kneels in front of her. Her shuddering breath brushes his face. He pulls the hem of her skirt down and moves back, ignoring the way that his leg screams at the movement. "I don't want that." She knows what he is, he tells himself again. A thief and a liar, lying to her now.

She looks at him, her eyes massive, black and empty. Her lips part in a plea that is like and unlike the ones he's imagined so often, before words tumble out. "Then what do you want?"

Thirteen-odd years ago, he left her without an answer. Today, he needs her to stay more than he ever has, and he holds out a hand to her. "You, Inej. You."

Her hands dig into the quilt that's just like the one he had on his bed as a child. If a piece of her is missing, Kaz will give her a piece of him to take its place. He may be wonderfully inadequate, but then why are his broken pieces shaped like her broken places? "You know my name," she says.

"It's the only word I know," Kaz answers back, his voice harsh against his throat. He wrote her something like that, long before he was ready to say it.

"And you don't…you're…" Her eyes focus on his outstretched hand, and her pupils dilate. Suddenly they're glittering with tears, and she takes his hand with all the force of an embrace. " *Kaz."*

He twists the ring back and forth on her finger. Every bit of kindness he can produce is an invention, something he has to cobble together with clumsy hands and present before it's made worthy. He loves her to the point of invention. He just wishes he could do it well.

Inej seems to collapse in on herself as she realizes where she is; she bows her forehead to their clasped hands and sits terribly still, trembling, gasping quietly.

She's crying, he thinks. But his hands are for wiping blood, not tears. He isn't meant for this. How much can he make better a man that was warped to begin with? His mother died bearing him—he killed before he took his first breaths. No one had to teach him to be cruel. He's not sure anyone *can* teach him to be kind.

But if anyone can, it's Inej.

So he kneels for her and he holds her hand. And he is glad to hurt when it's for her. The sun is stubborn on her back, and after some indeterminable amount of time, she lifts her head, eyes red and glistening. "Thank you," she says.

Kaz just shakes his head. She's smiling, and he doesn't understand it.

Inej tightens her grip on his hand. “Please,” she says, and the way she’s looking at him he would steal the sun itself for her, “Let’s just get married.”

It’s the easiest thing she could have asked for. They help each other to stand and prepare to head back out into the sun.

<><><>

The officiant is watching him write his signature. Kaz is used to being watched, but the eyes fixed on the top of his bowed head still itch.

He spins the contract around and pushes it forward with a brisk movement, Inej standing at his shoulder. The bespectacled man behind the desk looks up from the paper at Kaz, looking almost startled. Kaz is trying to ignore how familiar his face looks, minus the lines around the eyes. “Rietveld?” he questions.

Everyone in this damn town. Kaz grips the head of his cane tight. “Yes.”

“Are you from Ketterdam?” the man questions. “The way you speak.” His eyes are far too gentle behind those glasses. He must be expecting a man who’ll see him like a father, take kindly to kindness. Kaz only sees more honesty than he can stand to trust.

“You’re familiar?” says Kaz, fingers drumming impatiently on the head of his cane. His Barrel accent is something he crafted and cultivated over his first year in the city and never lost. He wonders how much listening to these people it would take before he started to sound like them again.

“I took law from the University,” the officiant replies. He hesitates, and Kaz has to fight the urge to hold his breath. On some level, he knows what’s coming.

“I—being honest, I was hoping I’d be able to find the Rietveld boys. No one had heard from them since they left, and I…” He shuffles the papers aimlessly. “No such luck, as I imagine you can guess. It’s been so long now. Two decades, I’d expect…”

“Twenty-one years,” Kaz says. He doesn’t recognize the sound of his own voice. It’s even raspier than usual. And in truth, he could count back to the day.

He hates the hope in those eyes, not quite the eyes of a stranger. “I was wondering if you might know what ever became of…”

He trails off as Kaz spins the pen in his hand and points back to where he signed. “Read it again.”

It takes a moment. Kaz could have said anything. He still isn’t sure why that’s what he chose.

At first, he regrets it. There is a terrible joy in the face that isn’t as strange as it should be. “Ambrose Janssen,” the man says. “You used to play with my daughter, if it’s really—Kaz? It’s you?” He holds out his arms, and Kaz automatically takes a step back. If it hurts Janssen’s feelings, he can deal.

“As much of me as survived,” he says, his voice pure gravel. He knows what’s coming next.

There’s that hope again. Shouldn’t it comfort him, to return the familiar—killing hope, dousing joy? This is what he’s used to. And yet. “And Jordan?”

Kaz feels Inej slip her hand into his free hand. He shakes his head. The old scars on his face are still there, and he’s nearly too old now for them to be taken as acne scars, but he doesn’t know how long it will take Janssen to notice.

Janssen shakes his head. Worse than any sadness Kaz expected to see on his face is the pity that he finds there instead. He wants to leave. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t bother,” says Kaz, perhaps more curtly than he means to.

“Is that all that needs signing?” Inej questions, speaking up at last, and he loves her for it. She steps up so that she is level with him.

“I—yes,” says Janssen, shaking his head. “It’s just so unbelievable…”

“No one is making you believe it,” says Kaz, with as much restraint as he can manage. “Now —”

Inej’s nails dig into his hand slightly. Even if he knows that she’s probably right, this is the most civility he can summon. Any more and he runs the risk of getting attached—or more likely, getting the people here attached to *him.*

“Shall we?” she says.

“Of course.” Kaz doesn’t understand that instead of any anger or sting, there is just that damnable pity in Janssen’s expression. But it doesn’t matter, he tells himself, because he is about to marry Inej and then they can leave in the morning.

Morning, he thinks as she releases his hand to lead them into the makeshift courtroom, is still a long way away.

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From a practical perspective, the massive windows in the room seem pointless. But seeing Inej bathed in sunlight, Kaz isn’t feeling very practical.

She is practically haloed; even the white she’s draped in looks slightly golden. It’s as if she has spun gold woven into her hair. He’s dimly aware that they aren’t alone, but his eyes refuse to venture anywhere else.

He wonders if there ought to be flowers, if Inej would have liked it that way—wild geraniums and spring crocuses and apple blossoms and whatever else she wanted. But maybe it really doesn't matter. Maybe she sees it the way he does—setting what they already know in ink and stone. And the formality is just that; he’s barely listening. No words have ever come more easily than “I do,” as many times as he has to say them. Even Inej’s eyelashes are

gilded, her eyes honeyed, her skin more aureate than bronze. The headpiece over her brow is all but illuminated. There's so much…light. Maybe that's better than flowers.

"Have you prepared any words of your own?" Janssen asks in the distance—or at least it seems that way.

To be honest, he hasn't. Words have never been his way. He can be plenty clever with them when he wants to, but never when it comes to Inej.

She, however, gives his hands a squeeze and meets his eyes in a way that makes the ache behind his sternum return. It almost breaks the moment, somehow; he doesn't quite believe that he's here, like this, and he's waiting for the catch. He's waiting for the curtain to be pulled back, the illusion revealed.

But it just…doesn't come. Instead, Inej says, "I told you there would never be anyone else for me. I know you don't believe in fate, Kaz, but there was never going to be anyone else." She laughs, soft as the creek that runs behind his childhood home, and says, "You look like one of my Saints today, like an icon in stained glass."

"They ought to be insulted," says Kaz, his voice burning against his throat with more than just its usual rasp.

"You say that," she replies, her voice brilliant with joy. "But you also say it's foolish to trust you. And I trust you."

Confessing is not a criminal's game, so Kaz has never made a habit of admitting to things. Maybe that's why he can't bring himself to admit how long he's wanted to hear those words. Since she first came back to Ketterdam after Jordan was taken, it's lingered in his thoughts, and—it's not that it wasn't obvious before, that she didn't fully trust him. And even at seventeen, he'd needed her to believe in him more than he was willing to say. It was more that it didn't bother him the same way—like her silence, how it crawled under his skin, how it tugged at his edges.

He lifts her hands in his, brings them to his lips, like she is a queen and he is swearing his allegiance. He doesn't make promises, but they're putting them in ink today. "I will never make you sorry for it," he swears on his twisted, crooked heart.

There are more words to be said, of course, now and later. But the things unsaid have always been the language they reserve for one another. So they exchange the rings, bands of solid gold, and Kaz whispers "The deal is the deal," and Inej laughs, a perfect hymn. They kiss—chaste and gentle since they haven't tried much more, and would rather not risk it in someone else's sight—but it's all so unimportant, in the end. Kaz and Inej, the captain and the criminal, Dirtyhands and the Wraith; they are inextricable from one another, and it's like Inej said. There would never be anyone else, that's all.

It's just that now, they are also husband and wife.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej return to the inn.

Chapter Notes

wicked333, Jordan did know, as did Jesper and Wylan; fear not, the fam will get to celebrate as soon as they're back in the city.

R_umpel, I think that is one of the downfalls of the comfort they have in leaving things unspoken, because they have this feeling then that there's nothing certain, no specific place they can land.

KiwisAndTea, re: comments on Kaz being angsty and feeling unfit for caring—it's almost not self-deprecating. I think he definitely has his moments of feeling broken and wrong for his tendencies and disposition, but he's also used it as a survival mechanism and has this weird pride in it as well.

Katasstrophey, you have GOT to tell me if you actually get any of those tattoos, lol.

Book_Junkie007, I have a soft spot for outsider POVs on Kaz, *especially* when they contrast the two sides of his nature.

ThatUselessHuman, I hope you've had a good sleep <3

Raphale, hey, take it from Kaz: you don't have to have the right words to convey a powerful sentiment.

the_purple_duck, YOU'RE WELCOME!!

Andhehe, next chapter is here! ;)

andyoudoctor, I feel like a proud parent watching them learn to trust one another.

thephonyqueenofengland, and it was a long time coming <3

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, YES to the parallel with the Inej/Dunyasha fight. They do have a very similar sentiment about refusing to wait for what they can take.

pancakes507, did you catch the bouquet? XD

They're on their way back to the inn as the horizon burns scarlet, a line of crimson as far as sight will run. The ache in Kaz's leg has grown to announce its presence, but even then it isn't bothering him the way it normally might.

It's quiet, but Kaz has learned to read Inej's silences, and this one is content. It's not the silence of something left unsaid, as it always used to be.

Their hands swing in time between them as they walk, his cane all but silent against the packed earth. Her knuckles bump against his—once, twice. Then her hand is in his hand, curled into his palm, warm except for the metal band that he brushes his thumb over. He has never loved gold quite like this.

They've gotten closer as they've walked, he thinks, as if the paths they're walking in were already carved to list towards one another. So inevitable, so simple. So many years of fighting and struggling and suffering on opposite sides of a room trailing from their shoulders. So much more yet before them.

Kaz's fighting style has been called many things, but elegant was never one of them. And yet…the way they fight together, whether it's another gang or just the cobwebbed corners of their own minds, it's answer for answer. They never have to talk about it. It's a leap and a catch, a punch thrown and a hook behind his ankles, a grip so tight it hurts. *Alive, alive, alive.*

They reach the inn, and Kaz opens the door. It's so quiet. He's forgotten how quiet it was here, all hours of the day—no shouting, no music. But they do nothing to break the silence. Just holding to each other says all that they need.

There's a different woman behind the desk this time. She looks up from her books and glances over Inej in her white dress, a knowing smile forming on her thin lips. "Congratulations," she says as they walk past towards the stairs.

Inej looks back over her shoulder. "How did she already—?"

"Word might actually travel faster here than in Ketterdam," Kaz replies drily. "What is there to do but talk?"

"You two keep the noise down, now," the woman says mischievously from behind them.

Inej's grip on his hand tightens.

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Kaz has long considered it a solid practice to not have regrets. There's no point in being halfway through a job and wishing things had gone differently, or realizing you've struck a bad deal and kicking yourself while you're down. You solve the problem, you destroy whoever crossed you.

That said, he's reconsidering that particular principle where his choices in booking this room are concerned. First of all, he is severely wishing that he'd selected one on the ground floor.

Second of all, the way that Inej is eyeing the lone double bed…

Kaz, standing by the dresser, loosens his tie with a sharp tug. “Considering that half the town believes I’m a phantom raised from the dead, I’d expect I can make other arrangements.”

“No, it—it’s fine,” says Inej, but her voice is a fragile wisp of itself. He looks at her; she’s taken off the headpiece that her mother sent her, but is making no move to set it down.

He wants to question her, he does, but for someone who moves as if the wind carries her, Inej is immovable once she’s set her mind to something. So, instead, he goes and sits on the bed—the side by the window, by the wall. Infinitesimally more trapped, but they say the devil’s in the details. It always seemed to be, for him.

Inej is having a staring contest with the headpiece, which no longer glitters in the dim room, the sun having set sometime since. Kaz keeps his distance, which is both easy and terribly difficult.

At length, she rolls her shoulders back, squares them, and that’s when he knows: this is a fight that she is going to see through to the bitter end.

Her strides to the dresser are purposeful, even if she only sets the headpiece down and methodically unclips her earrings—left, right. Her fingers brush up against the pearl buttons on her blouse and stall there.

“I—I need to…” She takes a slow, shaky inhale. “I should braid my hair.” But she doesn’t move to begin.

Kaz pushes himself off the bed and opts to leave his cane behind, despite the slight report of pain that comes with each step. Making sure that she can see him in the mirror, he stops behind her and shifts his weight to his good side.

Inej takes in another breath. It’s so practiced; Kaz wonders if she’s done this before to balance herself, on a rooftop or a high wire. He is so mesmerized by her smallest habits; he can’t seem to help cataloguing each one, storing them away beside figures and finances in his memory. She nods, and her hair ripples with the slight motion.

Kaz runs a hand through it. He used to dream of this, he remembers; the most he could even conceive of was to pull her hair loose from its rigid coil, to let the shining black waves spill over his hands, perhaps to finally catch a scent though she’d never carried one. She does now—jasmine, and spices in place of the sea salt; cinnamon and others that his Kerch senses can’t pick out by name.

His fingertips brush her back through her filmy blouse, and he checks her expression in the mirror; her eyelids seem to flutter, but then if anything it’s more determined than before. So he carries on, separating her hair into three thick strands, weaving them together—more clumsily than she could, perhaps, but better than the first time they tried this, he recalls ruefully.

The first time, between the fact that he was shaking from the second his hands brushed the skin of her neck and his complete lack of knowledge about braiding hair, he'd made a mess of it, essentially. But as he'd often said—sometimes ironically but always in some level of honesty, the shrouded kind being the only sort he had to offer—he was a quick study, and by now it's a practice that holds some comfort for both of them. It keeps them close, but safe and sane.

He's done it for Jordan once or twice. When he will again…if he will again…is a question he doubts will be answered tonight.

For now, it's just the two of them, Kaz and Inej, him and his…wife. When will he stop waiting for the curtain to fall away? When will he stop studying this like a magic trick in the mirror, searching for the cracks in the spectacle?

" *Kruge* for your thoughts," Inej murmurs, one hand resting at the hollow of her throat.

"If I were paid for my thoughts, we'd have never had to go to the Ice Court," Kaz replies, his attention returning to the locks of her hair sliding through his fingers. These same hands are branded with his legend, soaked in blood and shaped for cards and coins; and yet this, this is what feels like their purpose, more than any lock or pocket he's picked. He skims a burgundy ribbon from the dresser and ties off the end, a sailor's knot rather than a bow. He imagines Inej would prefer it that way.

She reaches back to sweep the finished braid over her shoulder, but her hand knocks into his instead; easily, their fingers interlace. Kaz glances at the mirror, where he finds Inej's eyes shut, lashes fanned across her cheeks, her expression utterly at peace.

It feels so wrong. Why should he, of all people, be the one to make her feel safe?

Inej's eyes open, and she turns to face him, never once releasing his hand. She breathes in as if she's about to speak but hesitates before saying, "Do you need to change…for bed?" The interlocking of their hands tightens, on whose part Kaz can't be sure—and does it matter?

He's comfortable enough, considering that it's rare for him to sleep by choice at all. "Do you?"

"I should." She isn't meeting his eyes, and even if she's looking over his shoulder, Kaz has a good idea of where she's locked her gaze. He shifts to block it momentarily, despite joints that appreciate his overwork even less than they used to complaining about it.

Kaz releases her hand, steps back. *What would she do? What has she done, all along?* There are pieces of this that they can't do for each other. And if Inej has had the patience for these years of standing by, ever the spectator, then even the one who is used to leading the charge can try his hand at it.

He sits on the bed—on the side nearest the wall, once again.

Inej faces the case that they brought, open but not unpacked. "I brought—something…" she says unsteadily, "but I…don't remember where I put it…" Her breathing is ratcheting higher.

“Take something off the top then,” says Kaz, his hands clenching tight around one another. He hates seeing her like this, but for her to know will make it worse.

Almost dazed, Inej reaches out and picks up one of his folded shirts, off the top of the pile. “This is yours,” she says, her voice almost unnaturally calm.

“Ours now,” says Kaz. “Legally speaking.”

Something that might be a shattered piece of a laugh breaks from her lips, and she sets the shirt on the stained-oak dresser, smoothing out the creases, stalling for time. Kaz lets her.

The blouse falls first. Button by button, her hands shaking as she goes, Kaz thinks, until it’s folded with almost unnatural precision beside his crisp white shirt. The skirt follows, much simpler—when she unpins something or other at her waist, Kaz’s eyes drop briefly to his lap for reasons he doesn’t care to name. He’s no bashful boy, now, but…some part of him twists uncomfortably at the idea of looking.

Perhaps because he’s completely dumbstruck when he does.

Inej is turned sideways to him, draped in a short, cream-colored silk chemise. The slight lacework on the lower hem does nothing to extend it much past her upper thigh, and it dips low in the back, exposing seemingly miles of her skin that carries a radiance even in the dim room. It’s just…so much. The musculature of her shoulders, the slight curve at her breast and the arch of her waist, the channel of her spine and the faint dusting of hair along it…a sound breaks from his throat that he doesn’t remember deciding to make, a humiliating confession he’d been hell-bent on hiding.

Inej startles slightly and looks back over her shoulder; Kaz ducks his head sharply, a flush creeping up his chest, of shame and something else, the other feeling that he doesn’t want now, that sent her spiraling earlier.

“We’re married, Kaz,” she says quietly. “You can look.”

“I can’t,” he says, clenching his hands so tightly that his nails dig into his palms, trying to block out all other thought. “When I do, it—”

He dares to look up again. Inej has shrugged his shirt on over her shoulders, and it’s nearly longer on her than her slip of a dress. “It’s better, if you do,” she says, sounding as if she’s steeling herself as well. “Instead of…if you don’t look, I can feel it. The people who thought themselves righteous would…like I’m some stained thing.” She keeps cutting out words, not meeting his eyes despite what she’s saying.

It’s just as well for him, that way. He doesn’t even think she realizes, but—her hand ghosts over her thigh as she speaks, absent, but he tracks the movement with a distinct sense that greed is no longer the one doing *his* bidding. This is a sort for which he’s entirely unprepared.

She reaches hesitantly for the buttons of his shirt, which hangs loose and open over the little dress on her lithe, compact frame. *Yes,* his mind whispers, but *No, leave it.* He wants this, but

he doesn't. He *wants,* and he doesn't want to.

Seeming to decide at last, Inej takes a step towards the bed, but she seems to freeze, her legs trembling.

Kaz starts to get up. "Should I—"

"No," she says, brow furrowed, shoulders set. "I can best this."

Familiar words, and ones that don't invite argument. Kaz folds back the quilt instead, pulls the sheets over his legs, trying to distract himself in the minutia of keeping them both safe and sane.

He remembers wanting something this way, having it burn inside of him with a strength that the harbor couldn't kill. Once it was to make his own kind of justice. And a part of him insists that this would be justice, too—to have her, like she long since said, without gloves and layers and armor between them. But who's to say that he himself will be able to bear having her so close for so long? Suddenly the night seems impossibly long.

But then the mattress sinks down beside him, and Inej is there. The rise and fall of her breath is as uneasy as it is over-deliberately even.

He doesn't know if she realizes that she's done just what he intended—her on top of the sheets and him beneath, putting a thin barrier between them.

"How can I help?" Kaz asks quietly, the words feeling as clumsy to him as a new language.

"Face me," Inej replies, her voice terribly fragile. She twists her braid around her hand one way, then the other, back and forth again. "That way you're not behind me and it doesn't feel like…"

The twisting heightens in pace, telling Kaz more than the end of her sentence ever could have.

He lays down on his side, elbow tucked under his head. A moment later, Inej follows, curling up at the very edge of the bed. They're still close enough for him to see the mole high on her cheek, so far back that it's almost at her ear. He can see every speck of color in her eyes, her dilated pupils. Her arms are wrapped around herself. It wouldn't help either of them for his to be instead, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't want to.

Kaz shifts position slightly. "Was that—"

Inej hugs the pillow, inhales as if steeling herself. "It's fine if you move, just—as long as I can see you."

When they get back to Ketterdam, he's going to string Heleen up with a noose made of bedsheets. Then he'll start on her past clientele.

"Talk to me," Inej whispers. "Anything. I just…" Her teeth are chattering, she's shaking so badly. Part of Kaz wants to abandon the whole venture. But he knows she wouldn't let him.

She is so brave. And no one but one who has struggled through everything she's feeling, who faces it still, would know the half of it.

"What should I tell you, Inej?" he asks. He wants to touch her shoulder, to hold her hand, but considering the knot in his stomach that he's been forcibly ignoring…

"Unimportant things," she says, drawing his shirt tight around herself. She makes a desperate attempt at a smile. "Tell me about your day."

"Well," says Kaz, meeting her eyes, "I got married today."

Inej gives him a watery smile. "What a coincidence," she says. "So did I."

Inej

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej go to see the apple trees.

Chapter Notes

Posting today because of all the excitement from the con yesterday, so without further ado, let's do some shout-outs~

appcalyps-o, I know the exact intonation that you're talking about, and it is how I will picture all of my readers from now on.

KiwisAndTea, whaaaat?? angst?? me?? I don't know *what* you're talking about XD

toovrede, <3

thephonyqueenofengland, that was the first twenty chapters or so, but hey, maybe I'll have them go back.

kanej_13, soft banter is my JAM.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, your comments are always SO GOOD. I love that you point out your favorite lines (but you knew that) and the analysis makes me feel smart, lol.

Book_Junkie007, yeah, I don't think it's exactly the kind of story that their friends would expect, XD.

andyoudoctor, all throughout this fic I've seen it as a sequential thing—their traumas are different, and to really touch on Inej's, Kaz has to work through a lot of the healing process first.

Raphale, they can appreciate the sentiment and hug each other, lol.

pancakes507, there's something about an incredibly slow burn that manages to be so fun to read and write. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Inej wakes up, the room is full of sunlight.

No oranges or incense. No purple canopy around the bed. And nothing, no one, touching her.

She rubs at her eyes to clear her vision. She's laying on her side, her arm bent and tucked under the pillow. It's fallen asleep, and she extricates it, sitting halfway up to roll her shoulder and try to shake off the pins and needles.

She's still wearing Kaz's shirt, she realizes.

He's next to her, a hand's width of space between; he's laying on his back, and for one hopeful moment she thinks he's still asleep, but then she realizes that his eyes are open, fixed on the ceiling.

Neither of them slept much. She wonders if Kaz slept at all.

She'd like to forget, to let the clarity of day burn what lies behind them—her mottled memories of the half-dreaming night before, twisting and struggling against the sheets, feeling strangled by them; she can count on one hand the times she's seen a look like Kaz's face like that, teetering on the edge of helplessness.

"Did you sleep at all?" she questions softly.

Kaz gives a noncommittal hum. She can sense just by hearing it the way that it rumbles in his chest, and she's struck by the sudden and absurd urge to touch his throat and feel him speak.

He rolls onto his side to face her. His hair, loose and soft, falls over his forehead, and there's a shadow along the strong line of his jaw. Inej extends a tentative hand and brushes her knuckle along it, shaky and soft as a feather, and finds it as rough as his voice. "I'm sorry," she murmurs.

Kaz gives her a questioning look. "I thought the Suli didn't apologize." His voice is a rolling burn in the morning, deep and coarse and thrilling.

Inej's hand falls to the mattress between them. "But I kept you up, *me vrano.* " *My crow.*

"You say that as if I'd normally sleep, treasure." He rests his hand on her waist, his shirt and her chemise between their skin; Inej's eyelids flutter and she breathes into the touch, grounding herself. Kaz's thumb drifts back and forth, gentle as a lake, wrinkling the fabric.

She wants to close her eyes, but more still she wants to soak this in—the warmth on her skin, Kaz gentle and muzzy with sleep, their legs brushing up against each other beneath the quilt, sheets between them. They've made it to morning, and if she's being honest, she'd like to stay here.

She feels half-foolish, clichéd, for the way she's gazing into his eyes—they're sweet nectar in the pale light, swirled with reflections—but maybe she shouldn't. Maybe, after all this time, they've earned this. "I love you," she says softly.

It feels so easy now. Like the first time turned the key to all the others she'd harbored.

“I…” Kaz swallows. She watches his Adam’s apple move, watches him struggle against himself. “I love you.” The words are barely audible, but they’re there—what he has to show, what they have to show for a decade and more yet.

His hand slides up to her ribs, slowly, and his thumb brushes the base of her breast. Automatically, Inej’s hands curl with a sharp jolt of panic, and Kaz lifts his hand.

“No,” she insists, more to herself than to him. “It’s all right. Go on.”

Kaz shifts position slightly, his eyes following hers, refusing to let her look away and hide the truth from him. “You’re sure?”

“Trust me.” Somewhere tangled in Inej’s thoughts is the idea that—if he believes she can do this, then she’ll believe it, too.

“I do,” says Kaz, and it sounds like a vow as he settles his hand back to her side. He is unbearably gentle. She’s never quite understood it—the way that those who would playact at being decent and upstanding would pay the price to use and abuse her body, and yet here is the monster, the demon, laying beside her with the sun in his eyes. Here is the man who didn’t need a reason, asking permission at every turn.

Kaz would say that we can only be what we are. But I wonder if it’s impossible to be what we are, if no one can be honest.

She’s seen the way he looks at her. And yesterday, it was too much—the heat in his dark eyes was too familiar. But even knowing what he wants…he doesn’t look at her, doesn’t touch her, like he has any right to her, even despite the rings they now wear. It’s like the way he calls her *treasure.* Maybe if he says it enough, she’ll believe that she is something other a tarnished shell of a girl, forged in fire and quenched in the canals.

Even under her mother’s eyes, she feels stained, some days. Never in his.

One day, she wants to…to learn with him how it should be. But Kaz isn’t the only one who needs to lay his armor down first.

For now…“Take me to see the apple trees,” she says.

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The farm is far enough outside of town that Inej finds herself silently questioning Kaz’s decision to walk there, but then again, there are essentially no other options out here. It’s not like Ketterdam, where the canals could carry you almost anywhere.

She keeps him in the corner of her eye, but she’s never quite been the one to look after him. Of course, subconsciously, she monitors him, tries to balance and account for his more self-destructive tendencies, but all the same…she has to trust Kaz with himself. Even if she knows that it will only get more difficult to do so once they make it to the farm.

She glances over to him. He looks more like himself today—all in black, his vest giving off a slight, inky blue sheen along the subtle brocade of the embroidered detail. His hair is pushed

back, combed along severe lines, unlike the way that it was this morning. Some part of Inej understands—he doesn't want to come back to this place already feeling like a piece of what's left behind. She knows the strength that he finds in Kaz Brekker as a persona, not quite a facade but—his armor. And maybe there are times, like today, where he's safer keeping it on.

" *Kruge* for your thoughts," says Kaz, the corner of his mouth twisting barely upward.

"If only," she replies, her eyes tracking the horizon line that never seems to get closer.

Kaz clicks his tongue softly. "Careful, now," he says, amusement in his rasp. "We haven't been married 24 hours and you're already sounding like me."

Inej gives him an exaggerated look of indignation, a slight laugh riding on her speech. " *You* stole *my* words first."

"I'd think you would be more surprised if I didn't," says Kaz, the slight smile now fixed on his lips. "I'm sorry to tell you, Inej, but you married a thief."

She's enjoying hearing him say that as much as she knows he's enjoying talking about it. It makes her feel almost childish, this untainted joy, but maybe that's just because she hasn't felt this way since she *was* a child.

Kaz hasn't been speaking for some minutes by the time they reach the farm, but Inej knows the moment that they reach it, because he goes from quiet to *silent.* So she looks up.

There really isn't much to it.

At the top of the shallow rise before them is an old house, the walls once lime-washed white but now speckled with grime and slowly being overtaken by vines, the roof steeply pitched and tiled slate-gray. It's nestled amid an orchard that probably once grew in neat rows, but has now sprawled in the patternless way that nature tends to do.

Kaz, she realizes, has slowed to a stop behind her. He's leaning heavily on his cane, staring up at the old house; to anyone who didn't know, his expression would look as inscrutable as ever, but she sees the new lines of tension around his mouth, the darkness like a candle's shadow flickering in his eyes.

Inej thinks of the Menagerie. "It's just another building," she says, looking back at him. "Where are the entrances, exits, windows, an attic? How do you get in and how do you get out, Kaz?"

He takes a heavy, unsteady step forward, then a second. "There are two rooms in the attic," he says, his voice a suspended, unnatural calm. "Two windows on the left. One on the right. There's…" He stops and swallows, the muscles in his neck coming into sharp relief.

Inej extends a hand back to him. She'll understand if he doesn't take it, if he can't, but she'd like to remind him of how much they've fought and won.

Absently, Kaz slips his hand into hers. A shudder runs through him, but he only tightens his grip and follows her up to the house. Inej is more than happy to walk as slowly as he needs.

“Has it been maintained at all?” she asks quietly as they approach the door.

“It was simple enough to include semi-routine maintenance in the payments on the property itself,” Kaz replies, in the same too-calm, distracted tone. He stops at the door, staring it down like every puzzle she’s seen him face.

Inej knows that feeling. It’s like they don’t belong here. She remembers wandering the caravan, feeling like a ghost in what was once her home, like less than a stranger. What do they have left when they’re no longer the children who knew these places? She wasn’t sure, back then, that she even remembered who that little girl was.

Does Kaz hear laughter rolling from the windows, footsteps racing across the floors inside? Does he smell a fireplace that no longer burns, a meal that will never be eaten? She doesn’t know, and she knows he won’t tell her.

But Kaz is the way that he is, and Inej finds herself utterly unsurprised when he opens the door and steps inside.

This is no occasion to carry her over the threshold—a tradition the Suli never practiced, anyway, because home is more about people than places to them. With a new husband or wife, you were already home.

I am, she thinks, watching Kaz stand in the old farmhouse.

The house is furnished with dust and silence. Inej looks out the grimy window, to the silhouettes of trees heavy with blooms and the miles of open sky. “Smells like apple blossoms,” she murmurs.

“It’s not the season for apples just yet,” says Kaz, tracking her eyes. “Harvest would be later. We’d get off school for it.”

She wonders what he sees, here. In the cramped wooden bench and table in the corner, the faded painting hanging over the old piano. She can just imagine memories coating this place even more thickly than the dust that plumes after their every step. But only Kaz knows what they are.

He crosses to the piano that’s wedged into a corner and presses down on a single key. The whole house seems to startle at the high, clear tone that cuts through the quiet air and then dissipates—but only after it echoes for a long, long time.

Kaz is bent partly away from her, so she can’t see his face.

“It still works,” Inej says softly. Silence is her friend and ally, and it has taken up residence here; something urges her not to disturb it. Even if Kaz and that old piano have no such qualms. He usually doesn’t.

“It’s out of tune,” he says.

“Could it be taught to play again?”

He lifts his eyes to hers. There’s something unfocused behind them that she understands more than she wants to. “Strange way to say that. Is that one of your proverbs?”

Inej stands straight as an arrow. “It could be.”

In lieu of a response, Kaz runs his hand over the keys, wiping the thick layer of dust from them and eliciting a soft tangle of sound.

“It doesn’t feel real, does it?” Inej questions. She knows that she has practically always drifted more than moved through the world, but going home for the first time, she’d felt like she was floating—suspended in some dream that no one else could quite touch or wake her from.

Kaz shakes his head, staring at some point beyond what she can see, that same disconnectedness behind his dark eyes. “No.”

She holds out a hand to him. “There’s still more to show me.”

Kaz takes a half-step away from the piano, the click of his cane muffled by the dust coating the floorboards, but he lingers there, halfway to her.

“We’ll be back.” She can only imagine the past that Kaz sees in this house, but she sees a future—Jordan racing to the top of the tallest, sprawling oak; picking apples and getting her hands sticky with juice; Kaz playing the piano.

In the present, where neither of them can seem to remain, Kaz slides his hand into hers, cool and soft. He doesn’t say a word, but he doesn’t need to.

She follows him out the back door that latches by means of a tarnished hook on the wall; it’s built after the quintessentially Kerch style, where the top half can swing open independently of the lower half. Made, perhaps, for a mother to call a reckless child home.

The fields are separated into neat quarters bordered by buttercups, and startlingly green. She says this last to Kaz. “In Ravka, everything is gold. The wheat fields would grow up to my waist, and go on for miles. I’ve never seen green like this.”

“The rain,” says Kaz, whose eyes are fixed on some point at the edge of the woods. “It takes a certain kind of plant to survive it, but what does survive, thrives here.”

“That could almost be a proverb,” says Inej, her thumb brushing against the outside of his hand. Slowly, they start forward, to make their way across the open expanse of ground.

“Your Saints forbid,” says Kaz, something newly dry in the roughness of his voice. Still, he sounds more like himself than he has since they got here.

A neat line of trees, mostly mixed oak and elm, draws a line at the back of the property—presumably between this farm and the next. There’s a cluster of linden trees, however, on the corner, which is where Kaz seems to be headed.

As they approach, Inej sees what she hadn't earlier—a small, twisting stream, like an amber ribbon carving its way between the trees. The water burbles over mossy stones before trickling on its merry way.

Kaz, she realizes, has released her hand to go and stand before one of the linden trees, its branches full and clustered close to the ground. She goes to stand beside him. "What's special about this one?"

"Nothing yet." He hesitates. "My da planted it. Most of these."

"Is this where…?" If she's honest, her eyes had already checked for some marker or headstone, but it isn't an unheard-of practice to plant a tree over a loved one's body instead of leaving a stone to mark the place.

He gives a sharp shake of his head. "Too close to a water source. But—" He swallows, his grip tightening on the head of his cane. "If there were no body, there wouldn't be an issue with putting a marker here."

Jordie. The ghost that has always stood between them. But Inej holds no bitterness for that, even if she suspects that Kaz does. From what he's managed to tell her, Jordie was just a boy doing his best before he was ready.

"I like that idea," she says, taking his hand once again, leaving no space between them for ghosts, well-meaning or otherwise.

Kaz seems unable to move his eyes from that single patch of earth. "It would get his memory out of my head," he says slowly. "Or…"

He looks frustrated, but Inej understands. More than she might want to, but just enough to be what he needs. "A legacy doesn't feel heavy at first, but the weight grows with time," she says. "You would be putting some of it down here."

"You're in a mood for proverbs today."

"No. that one was just me."

Kaz laughs, sudden and startling and gone too fast. He leans towards her, their arms brushing, and then he's serious again. "Let's go home," he says.

One could make a fair argument that 'home', to them, is any number of places. But Jordan is back in Ketterdam. And with the promise that this is far from the last they'll see of Lij, Inej knows what he means. She squeezes his hand. "Let's go home," she echoes.

Chapter End Notes

thinking about sleepy kanej and morning voice kaz today. And how it was once believed that it was impossible to tell a lie beneath a linden tree.

also, “me vrano” is taken (with permission) from “Between the Lightning-bug and the Lightning” by the wonderful oneofthewednesdays.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan gets a last name.

Chapter Notes

I am back on my regularly scheduled nonsense, which of course means that it's time for some shout-outs~

KiwisAndTea, I think this chapter will be a nice blend of angst and family fluff (as Jordan's chapters are wont to be.)

thephonyqueenofengland, soft sleepy kanej has a very special place in my heart, I have to admit.

EdmundPevensiesQueen, ask and you shall receive. ;)

andyoudoctor, I'm really enjoying writing them as they search for a balance—i.e., hugs and cuddling might be better under other circumstances, but maybe not after a long and difficult night. I love how much they're willing to fight and love one another within that balance.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I spent an unhealthy amount of time thinking about how you mentioned being able to feel what something means, because...just yes. That's what I am aiming for, and it's so nice to hear when it works XD

pancakes507, I adore the pet names and can't wait to bring them back <3

ArgentiSolis, I was possibly *too* excited about this comment. That is such a high compliment! Thank you so much!

Raphale, you know that I am a sucker for some visual imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan doesn’t bother listening for the doorbell to ring. She knows Kaz and Inej wouldn’t use it. But she knows that they’re supposed to be home today, so she is up in her room, painting and *waiting.* Marya was with her a little while ago, but now she is painting by herself. She’s trying to paint a spray of orange lilies, but she is really too impatient for painting, so she probably won’t finish it.

“I didn’t know you liked still lifes, *meja.* ”

Jordan jumps up so fast that if she hadn’t been so well-trained, she might’ve spilled paint all over the floor. “Mama!” Usually she calls Kaz and Inej by their first names these days, but she’s just so *excited.*

It’s been a long time since Inej has needed to kneel to hug her, but she does it anyway, and Jordan runs to her, and they sink to the floor in a tangle of one another’s arms. Jordan nestles her head against Inej’s shoulder and looks up at her; Inej pulls a chain from her vest and shows her the rings on it—one woven like vines, the other a solid, shiny gold band.

“Woah,” Jordan says. “You actually did it.” It’s not like she didn’t know where they were going and why, but…it feels different to sit here, looking at the ring, and know that Kaz and Inej are *married.* She remembers back to when Kaz barely even wanted to be her da.

She wonders if he does anymore.

Inej makes a funny sort of coughing noise that Jordan suspects is a badly concealed laugh. “Did you think that we wouldn’t?”

“Not like that,” Jordan protests. “Just…It’s weird. Does it feel weird to you?”

Inej shifts so that Jordan is more upright and can look her in the face. “It doesn’t feel real yet,” she says, pushing some stray pieces of hair back into Jordan’s loose plait. “Not weird, though.” She gives a slight, teasing smile, and Jordan burrows back into her arms.

“I missed you.”

“We missed you. We’re taking you with us next time.” Inej moves her arm to wrap it over Jordan’s shoulders, rocking back and forth just slightly, like the wind is carrying her.

“Next time?” Jordan questions hopefully.

“I think you’d like it there.” Inej hesitates, and then, “Kaz wants to take you.”

Jordan tenses up. She can’t help it. It’s like her whole body is a wire pulled tight, near tight enough to snap. “I thought he was mad at me.”

“He isn’t.” Inej rises neatly to her feet, unfolds really, and pulls Jordan up with her. She keeps their hands clasped, and Jordan doesn't mind at all. “It’s the opposite. He started to care for you, and that scared him.”

Jordan stares at her. “Why?” She knows that Kaz is a dangerous person, and every dangerous person has to be made that way by something, but—she doesn’t know why that would make him scared of *her.* She couldn’t do anything really bad to him if she wanted to. *And he knows that, since he thinks I’m such a kid,* she thinks bitterly.

“He does business with people’s secrets,” Inej replies. “And he gave you one of his that was very valuable and very dangerous, even if by accident. But you know what I think.” She gives Jordan a pointed look, lips slightly pursed, and Jordan groans.

“You want me to talk to him. I know.”

Inej’s smile gets just a bit more mischievous, in the way that only a thief, spy, and pirate like her could do. “Let’s go downstairs.”

Jordan sighs again, but it’s gone as quick as a summer rainstorm. With an exclamation of “Race you!”, she’s running for the banister, ready to fly the whole way down.

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Downstairs, Kaz and Wylan are talking when Jordan hops down onto the plush mauve rug spread across the landing. All the momentum of her spiraling race down seems to vanish as soon as she sees Kaz, and she hates how uncertain it makes her feel.

Kaz looks up, and he looks at her like he wants to say something. Jordan catches the glint on his hand—no gloves today, just a solid gold band to match the one Inej is wearing on that chain. She doesn’t understand the look on his face, but now she’s wondering if she ever has.

“Hi,” she says, looking between him and Wylan, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.

“Hello, Jordan,” Kaz says carefully. He sounds like—like he’s walking along a wire, trying not to tip to one side or the other, eyes fixed wherever he’s going.

Just fall already, Jordan thinks. *How else will you know how to get back up?*

But his eyes move to a spot over her shoulder, and Jordan doesn’t have to turn around to know that everything will be okay—because now, Inej is here.

“Jesper is very excited about this dinner,” she says from behind Jordan, the note of a laugh in her voice. “Should I be worried?”

“Only if he were cooking it,” says Wylan, stepping away from Kaz’s side.

Jordan is unconcerned on that front. One of her favorite parts about staying with Jesper and Wylan is the food; she tried duck for the first time this week, and even though their head cook, Miss Elise, is half Kaelish and always getting mad at the other staff, she’s nice to Jordan and slips her little treats when no one's looking.

“He’s still upstairs?” Kaz asks, his voice buttoned up as tight as a mercher’s starched collar. It’s driving Jordan crazy.

“Not for much longer, I suspect,” says Inej, looking back up the stairs behind her. “But he said he has a surprise.”

“Oh for Ghezen’s sake,” Wylan mutters, pulling on a piece of his hair.

“What—” Kaz starts, sounding irritated, but Jesper interrupts him by practically bounding down the stairs, sending Jordan darting out of the way.

“I won’t hear this slander in my own house,” he says, but he’s smiling.

“Shut your ears if you like, it’ll still be true,” Kaz replies, and Jordan realizes that his face is doing something other than the scowl it’s been settled into. Something…better.

“My gifts are many,” says Jesper, with an unnecessarily extravagant twirl of his wrist. “If the culinary arts aren’t—”

“‘Culinary arts’?” Kaz repeats skeptically. Jordan giggles.

“All right, fine, let’s not talk about me,” says Jesper, descending the stairs the rest of the way to stand next to Wylan. “I really should’ve started off congratulating you two.” He’s wearing an autumn-orange coat, gold embroidery encircling the buttons, the collar tailored in what *he* says is a new fashion coming from Shu Han. Jordan suspects that he just thinks it looks cool —and somehow expensive without being, Saints forbid, boring.

“There will be plenty of time for that,” Inej reassures him. Jordan is glad that Inej has stayed standing next to her; she knows that they were barely gone for two days, but she has the uncomfortable sense that she’s going to have to share Inej’s attention more than she’s ever had to before. And it’s not—it’s not like she doesn’t want that, like she hasn’t hoped that they could be a real family for years now, it’s just…if Kaz is mad at her, and Inej is busy being married to him, then where does that leave Jordan?

She slips her hands around Inej’s arm. Maybe those are the fears of the little kid that her da thinks she is. But that doesn’t make them go away.

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Dinner is long, of which Jordan takes full advantage. By the end of it, she is so full that she keeps checking the buttons on her pants to make sure they’re not coming off.

It’s raining outside, but Wylan lit some candles high up overhead. Funny how that is, Jordan thinks—when it’s dark and storming outside, the inside feels extra dry and warm. Safe. But maybe that's just because of the company, she thinks, looking at her family gathered around.

“Jesper wanted to get you one of these new contraptions from the Wandering Isle that cook bread for you,” says Wylan, swirling his glass, which by this point is mostly empty.

In the background, Miss Elise is glaring at Kaz—or, specifically, his elbows and the fact that they’re planted on the table, something she has never gotten mad at Jordan for.

“That sounds cool,” Jordan pipes up.

“I agree,” says Jesper, tipping an imaginary hat to her. “But it needed a more personal touch.”

“That’s what worries me,” says Inej, not quite hiding a smile. Jordan isn’t sure that she and Kaz realize the way that they’re leaning towards each other, bent just subtly closer, like plants trying to grow towards the sun. Jordan is almost certain they’ve always been like that, so… she isn’t sure why it bothers her now.

She really hasn’t been talking much, but that’s just because…she wants to soak this up, drink it in. They’re all clustered at one end of the long, fancy table, laughing together and talking

and just…being a family. A real, written-on-paper and sealed-with-rings family.

Except Jordan. She doesn't have a signed paper or even a true last name. She's in school under Ghafa, but…that isn't really the same thing. She doesn't have anything for her parents to call her when she gets in trouble.

Well, I do. He called me 'Jordie'.

She's tired of the not-looking and the not-knowing and the valuable, dangerous secrets. She's going to make Kaz jump off that stupid wire herself if she has to. She pushes the chair that's too big for her back from the table that's too big for all of them and jumps to her feet. "Da. I wanna talk to you."

Kaz gives her another one of those looks that she can't read. But then again, everyone is looking at her.

"Go on," says Inej. "I'll stay in suspense a while longer."

"Maybe I'll make you guess," says Jesper.

"We could play charades," Wylan adds drily, and just like that, it all moves on. The candles go on wavering, the old friends go on laughing, and Kaz stands up and follows Jordan into the separated, open hallway that leads into the parlor. There are panels of mahogany on the walls, polished to a shine that reflects the light of the lanterns bracketing the doorway.

As soon as they're out of earshot of the others, Jordan says, "You need to jump off the wire."

Kaz leans on his cane and looks down at her. She wishes she could tell what he's thinking. "Isn't it the point to stay *on?* "

Jordan feels like stomping her foot in frustration, but that's something a little kid would do. She has to prove to him that she's not the child he thinks she is—he would never trust a kid with one of those valuable, dangerous secrets of his. "What I mean," she says, forcing herself to be slow and calm, "is you're being too careful."

Kaz gives her a cold look, his stare hard as flint. There's a painting behind him of a ship tossed in a storm—looking like a toy against the black waves. "Inej has been teaching you proverbs."

Jordan wants to be scared, but she can't if she wants him to really listen to her. Besides, the hall is narrow enough that there isn't room to back up, so she stands her ground. "No," she says, looking him dead in the eyes, "I made that up." Briefly, she worries her lip, but then she matches his stare and says, "I've got a deal for you."

Something in the way Kaz is regarding her changes. He stands up a little taller, looks a little less down at her and a little more right into her eyes. "What business, Jordan?"

"Secrets are your currency," she says, her shoulders pulled back. She thinks she can hear her heart, it's beating so loud, but there's no turning back now. "So I'll trade you one of mine for one of yours."

Kaz runs the hand that bears his wedding ring over the head of his cane. He's quiet for what feels like an infuriatingly long time. At last, he says, "I'll take those terms."

"I'll go first," says Jordan. "Show you that mine's good." She opens her palms to him, as if she's showing that she's unarmed. Or like a magician— *nothing to hide, so how did I do it?*

"Dangerously honest of you," Kaz says drily. There's something that might just be the lantern-light in his eyes, but Jordan wonders.

"That's what we're doing," she says. "Being honest." Once again, she finds herself standing up straighter, drawing her shoulders back, doing whatever she can to make herself feel like she's ready for this. Her shadow looks tall and proud on the paneled walls. "Alby is enrolling at the University in the fall. He told me when I saw him last. And I'm going to see him."

Kaz's jaw tightens, but she won't let him interrupt her. "His dad won't be there, and Alby doesn't know who I am. He just helped me when the slavers took me. He gave me a map home. He's been my friend, all right? I don't know how he could have been making some plan this whole time."

"The best of us improvise," Kaz says sharply.

"So I will," Jordan replies. "If it comes to it. But I at least want to try, so—there you go. That's my secret." Once again, she holds her hands up, spreads them wide, the finale of the trick. "There's your pay. Your turn."

Kaz gives her a slow, contemplating look. There's something exciting about it, like this is real business, like it's as serious to him as it is to her. At length, he says, "There's something you want me to say."

It wasn't in their terms to ask. But Jordan takes that as an offer. She finds herself searching his face for the answer before she even asks it, trying to understand. "Who's Jordie?"

He arches an eyebrow at her, although Jordan feels a small thrill of victory when she's able to realize—he's not really that calm about it. He drew back a little further, held his cane a little tighter, when she said that name. "Inej already told you."

"That's not really it," Jordan answers. She glances over to the doorway of the dining room, listens to the meaningless ebb and flow of voices and the rain rushing against the roof. "Why'd you call me his name?"

Something passes over Kaz's face, and she's certain that it's more than just a trick of the shadows this time. "He was reckless. He trusted the wrong people." His words are short and bitten-off, like he's trying to say as little as possible and move on from it before he's even done.

Jordan lets out a sharp breath. "You…Forgot." *Trusted the wrong people.* She turns those words over and over in her head, tries to pull them apart, to understand.

He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t have to. And somehow, it doesn’t surprise Jordan that he could Forget, too—the way Inej does, the way she still does sometimes. It’s like having a nightmare and not being able to go back to sleep after, because you think you’re still in it. She knows that Kaz probably thinks it’s a bad thing, but…it makes Jordan understand why secrets are so valuable and dangerous to him. To hold one feels like she’s won something. It makes her feel rich.

“The deal is the deal,” says Jordan, and puts her hand out to him.

Even without his gloves, her hand looks small next to Kaz’s, and she wonders if she’s gotten into more than she can understand. But it’s too late for wondering now.

So they shake on it. Except…he slips something into her hand.

“What’s this?” Jordan questions. It’s a stiff piece of paper, parchment-like, sealed with deep crimson wax. Without waiting for Kaz to answer, she breaks the seal and opens it. It must have been printed, not handwritten, because the writing is neat and blocky, but all of those thoughts evaporate when Jordan realizes what it actually says.

Certificate of Adoption.

Adoption.

Her eyes fly over the page, though it gets harder to read as her hands start shaking—she’s gripping it like a lifeline, she realizes, so tight it might tear. *Jordan Rietveld.*

She reads that name again and again, turns it over in her head like an acrobat doing tricks, makes it disappear and reappear again. *Rietveld.*

She looks up at Kaz.

He’s smiling.

It’s a little thing, and anyone who didn’t know him like Jordan does might not even notice it, but—he’s her da. For real, she realizes.

“Is—is it a good day?” she asks, her voice sounding strange and shaky. To be honest, she isn't sure what she'll do if it isn't, but Kaz opens his hands like she did before, like a magician putting on a show— *nothing to hide.*

That’s all that it takes for Jordan to run into his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note to everyone that I am going to be taking next week off. my saturday is shaping up to be *very* full, and it seems like the delayed posting really hurt feedback

this week, so this seems like a good spot to have a short break.

I'm going to admit that I'm not in love with this chapter; there are things that I like about it, and it may just be that the nature of Jordan's POV is more straightforward and less poetic, but I'm afraid that it's not up to my usual standard. I'm hoping that taking some extra time this coming week will allow me to come back with the kind of quality you all come here for. <3

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby moves in and gets a surprise visitor.

Chapter Notes

I am back and better than ever with your shout-outs!

hardly_a_ghost, I love exploring what traits they've picked up from each other despite not being biologically related.

the_purple_duck, all the love!!

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, Jordan has apparently inherited the family penchant for metaphors.

cameliawrites, the growth is evolving and happening differently over time, but it's been amazing watching it blossom and change.

thephonyqueenofengland, I just *had* to make the whole family complete!

Blue_daisies, I love the freedom that I have with Jordan, to make her into her own person.

toovrede, at last! It's going to take some time for them to adjust, but there is so much glorious hope ahead of them.

KiwisAndTea, I wanted the chapter to really focus on family, including of course Jesper and Wylan.

peppermintfae, I have a soft spot for Kaz and Jordan.

pancakes507, one of the things I love about writing is that sometimes, the simplest lines can pick the hardest punch.

R_umpel, Jordan is smarter than perhaps even Kaz gives her credit for. She knows how to speak his language.

andyoudoctor, honestly, I think it's a lot of the similarities between Kaz and Jordan that made the situation what it was.

Raphale, Jordan definitely learned tact and how to manage people from her mom, lol.

addsomehoney, thank you for this beautiful comment, and welcome to the family!

"I think that's everything," Alby says, looking around the modest dormitory. He grins. "Thanks, Jort."

Jort was originally employed by his father, as far as Alby could tell, to lift heavy things and move them around. It makes sense, given that he is half-Fjerdan and as solid as the walls of Hellgate, but when Pekka's mistresses started paying too much attention to all the lifting that he was doing, Jort was sent to help Alby "get settled" at the University of Ketterdam. Presumably entailing an indefinite stay.

Currently, despite the fact that Jort is rather shy and soft-spoken, he is terrifying Alby's roommate, Koen, whose face is dwarfed by his round glasses and cloud of mouse-brown curls.

"He's not gonna beat you up," Alby informs Koen. He isn't sure that he could even convince Jort to talk to a stranger, let alone go after them.

Koen just stares at Alby as if he's speaking Shu.

Alby gives Jort a weary look. "They should have got you set up with your own room, probably—you're free to go sort that out. If you get bored, one of the gangs would probably be glad to have you."

Now he is receiving terrified stares from two directions.

He sighs. Then sighs again. "I was joking. But only about the gangs. You *are* going to have to talk to strangers eventually."

Jort gives him a pained look, but he does eventually shamble off. Alby gives him what he hopes is an encouraging thumbs-up.

Turning back from the doorway, he gives the room a proper once-over. Koen is sitting on his bed, amidst an abundance of pillows, and Alby's is tucked against the opposite wall, under the eave, draped in an oversized quilt in numerous shades of green. There's a window on the back wall that Koen has put a few potted plants on, a small bookshelf beneath it, and a pair of narrow wardrobes bracketing the door.

Alby gives a low and shaky whistle. "Home sweet home," he says softly.

To be honest, he relates a little more than he'd like to with the abject panic on Koen's face. Except for his visit with Miss Irene last year, he hasn't left home since he was, what, three? Now he's miles and miles away, in the heart of the most dangerous city in Kerch, fifteen with a timid mouse of a roommate and a giant with social anxiety.

Looks like a job for that Kaelish fighting spirit, he thinks. He sincerely hopes that there's enough fighting spirit in his blood to get his legs to quit shaking.

"I'm gonna go to the library," Koen says quietly. He pushes himself up off of his bed with what seems like a monumental amount of strength, clutching a leather satchel to his chest. "Ought to find my books before classes start."

"Doubt the library would have those," says Alby, absently opening and closing one of the wardrobe doors. It squeaks. "Not when they could charge an arm and a leg for them."

Koen shrugs his bony shoulders. "Worth a shot," he says, and darts past Alby and out the door.

There goes a truly iron will, Alby thinks. *Hopeful in the face of higher education.*

The absence of said iron will, however, leaves him quite poignantly alone. It's raining, because it's Ketterdam and it's always raining, and the room has taken on a slightly gray cast. Alby sits down on his bed.

This is real, he thinks. It's a sort of inane thought, he'll admit, since yes, of course it's real; he can hear the soft rush of rain against the roof, and feel the shoes he's growing out of pinching his toes, and look out through the window towards a sea of buildings blurred by smoke and fog. Even still, it wouldn't be so hard to convince himself that he's dreaming.

He hunches into his wool coat. It's sea-green, one of the buttons mismatched and two more missing. It's the only one that he has; the weather is usually mild out in the countryside, and besides, he's been growing. Not Ketterdam, though—the city is cold in a way that seeps in and hangs heavy on him like wet clothes. There's no escaping it.

Something makes Alby look towards the window. He isn't sure now, and will never be, what it was; the rain never falters, and the wind carries on with its lament, giving voice to the misery that permeates this city. There is no sunlight to shift or reflect on the walls. And yet.

He's got half a mind to curl up under his quilt and take a nap, just sleep right up until classes tomorrow. But something won't let him. The world seems to be waiting, holding its breath.

He doesn't hear the window open, but he probably shouldn't have expected to.

There are any number of things that he could say to the girl standing in what is newly his room. Some clever, some practical, some rude but probably effective. What he ends up doing is staring for several long seconds before finally saying: "...We're on the fourth floor."

She pushes her hood back and pulls the tail of her braid forward over her shoulder. Somehow, she is completely dry. "I see why you got into the university. You're a regular genius."

Alby scowls. Some part of him considers that he ought to be at least marginally concerned about this state of affairs, but maybe he is simply so used to monotony that this is a pleasant change. "You climbed up to the fourth floor. In the rain," he reiterates.

"And silently, too," she says proudly, inviting herself in and sitting down on Koen's bed.

Alby has been told that he has a way with words. His essay got him a scholarship, and he's already sweet-talked and made nice with several members of the faculty during orientation. Right now, however, there is not a single word coming to his mind.

The girl seems unbothered. She lounges back on Koen's bed, studying the ceiling with interest. Her hair is in a long braid, except for where it's shaved short on the sides, and her eyes are lined in kohl. Her skin is gleaming bronze, the only bright thing in a city of gray.

Alby blinks. Then he blinks again. Then he stares for longer than is really necessary. "...Jordan?"

A smile breaks over her face, a sudden and brilliant thing. For a moment, he is home again, the sun in his eyes and the world brimming with possibility.

"I knew you'd get there eventually," she says, drawing her knees up to her chest with a snap, like a stretched-out spring that's been released.

"How did you find my room?" Alby says blankly, still refusing to comprehend several things about this situation. Most of the things. Almost all of the things, if he's really being honest. And he is that—painfully, sometimes unfortunately honest.

"A magician never reveals her secrets," Jordan proclaims. "Or a spy, if you like that better."

"You're a spy?" Alby says blankly. He feels like he needs to sit down, despite the fact that he is already sitting.

"And a magician," Jordan says patronizingly, drumming her fingers on her lap. "Look at you, you're getting it."

Alby glares at her. "Can you *not* talk to me like that?"

"I mean," Jordan sighs, pushing herself up off of Koen's bed, "I *can*... "

"Okay." She's standing up, so Alby feels like he should be, too. She seems shorter than he'd expected, though maybe he's just taller than he thought in comparison. She seems irritated with this state of affairs, but the way that she's looking at him, with that cute little divot between her eyebrows….

Alby has forgotten what he was going to say.

"What?" Jordan demands impatiently.

"Right. Okay." He crosses his arms, in an attempt to feel more in control of this situation. "What are you doing here?"

The power and nonchalance runs out of her. It's like a vanishing trick; poof, gone. Suddenly she is almost shy, and Alby feels utterly lost. "I wanted to see you."

Why? he thinks but doesn't say, given that he's been asking more than his share of stupid questions since she got here. The rain seems more distracting than soothing now, a persistent

drumming overhead.

Jordan twists her hands together, then rolls her shoulders back, face set in determination.

She's not turning back now, Alby thinks.

"It's been years," she says, a new and adamant brightness in her eyes. "And your dad's not here to say anything about it. Nor's mine, even though he's…mostly okay with it. I think."

"So he just *let* you climb four stories in the rain," Alby says, his arms still folded.

"Oh, he does that all the time," Jordan says with a nonchalant wave of her hand. She strolls over to the window and slips her hands into the highest of the many pairs of pockets on her roughspun dark breeches, staring out over the dim silhouette of Ketterdam and the university square.

"But he knows where you are?" Alby presses, taking a step closer to her. His shoes, the loafers that he's almost grown out of, click on the unpolished floorboards. It seems loud against the rain.

"He…has known…that I would be here at some point," Jordan says slowly, turning around with her hands tucked behind her back and an expression that fails to be innocent. Alby is rather too tempted to believe her, when she looks at him like that.

He has to be stern, he reminds himself, with himself as well as with Jordan. "I feel like I should be concerned," he informs her.

She hops up onto the windowsill, somehow landing with one of Koen's plants on either side of her feet and not a single speck of soil disturbed. "You shouldn't," she says. "Don't you remember? I was nine when all it took was your map to get me back home. I was thirteen when I found you in the library and had you back before anyone knew better."

"You forgot the part where you threatened me," Alby grumbles.

Jordan gives him a sunny smile, and for one disconcerting moment he thinks the rain has stopped. "Didn't forget," she says. "I trusted you'd remember. And I need you to trust me."

Maybe it's just the whole business of starting at the university, or being alone in a new and dangerous city, but Alby has the sudden and overwhelming feeling of being swept up, or perhaps leaping face-first, into something he is wholly and utterly unprepared for.

Certainly, the scholar in him, the boy fed on tales of how this city had made his father scared and tired, was tempted to wrap himself up in his sea-green coat with the missing buttons and turn his face into its collar.

But that same boy had spent his life looking out windows and aching to run over the fields that waited for him. That same boy had come to Ketterdam, fourteen, and seen life and commerce and possibility on every crowded corner. That same boy had met a little pirate of a girl, drawn her a map, and promised they'd meet again.

“All right,” he says with a sigh. “Say I trust you. What do you want?”

She gives him that same smile. “That’s easy,” she says. “I want to see you again. That’s all.”

Alby finds himself grinning back. He can’t help it. Whatever his father says, this city *is* full of possibility, as real as the girl on his windowsill. “Sure,” he says. “I’ll be here.”

Jordan salutes him, and then—she’s gone. He doesn’t even see her fall. But he knows that she wouldn’t.

Magic, Alby thinks. Whatever it is he’s fallen into, he can’t wait for it to start.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz learns what he likes. Inej foretells bad fortune for slave traders.

Chapter Notes

I am so hype for the S2 first look today! Figured I'd give you all some kanej to get you excited, too. Oh, and of course, your shout-outs~

ThatUselessHuman, lovely to have you back! I really love the idea of Alby as the next Wylan, actually...getting dragged into this and feeling in over his head...hmm, I think there's something to that! XD

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, can I flip the script and give you one of my favorite quotes from this comment? Because "if for kaz it’s only day in ketterdam when inej smiles, for alby jordan’s smile is what takes him to the best parts he remembers of home" is just so. WOW. I don't even know what to add to that, it's just so spot on!

ArgentiSolis, you are also lovely, and I hope you're having an amazing day!

cameliawrites, they are indeed very soft and adorable. I really like how you mentioned that while we know how much she's still figuring this stuff out, Alby is just plain impressed.

KiwisAndTea, he really has no idea. He thought he was going to get mugged, and instead there's a pirate/spy/pretty girl breaking into his room.

Raphale, family reunions are going to be....interesting, indeed. "Remember that time you lied about murdering me? Good times."

thephonyqueenofengland, Alby has the talent that I did not have at 15 and still don't now, which is to keep the snark mostly internal.

ificouldseethefuture, trust me, this is going...places XD

your_local_lesbian, it's so cool seeing people develop headcanons about these OCs. Look ma, I'm famous!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a balancing act to construct a second branch of the tunnel—not only to finance the work, but to conceal the purpose. Kaz can count on a single black-gloved hand the people in this city that he would trust with even the knowledge of the project's existence, and frankly, were he so skilled, he would have built the damn thing himself. In the end, he'd used the same team that built the first tunnel, hired them under an alias, and employed one of his many disguises. Even Inej was skeptical of the amount of work that the project entailed, as she'd watched him bent over the few financial records he was forced to keep, burying any figures that would evidence the project.

Still, he suspects that she is glad for it now, now that he has not only a shortcut back to their house, but a sharp divide between the segments of his life—a barrier, as it were, to protect Jordan. Especially since Inej has been venturing out on single missions and scouting trips, rebuilding her crew—he knows that it will only be so long before she is drawn back out to sea, and that he can't and won't stop her. Secrecy is only a first line of defense, and while his reputation holds its own sway, he sleeps more easily—at least, when he actually sleeps—with the knowledge that he can get home to Jordan quickly, and no one else can.

His footsteps are muffled on the packed-earth floor, and the cool, damp air clings to him as he undoes every level of the locking mechanism and shoulders open the heavy, iron door. It's never exactly warm in Ketterdam, but the temperature rises several degrees as he steps out into the muted sunlight of the Zelver district, his coat slung over one arm. An added benefit of dressing like a mercher is that even in the richest parts of the city, he is never out of place unless one looks too closely.

And people never do. That fact has made him a rich man.

What a strange and altogether familiar thing it is, to enter his own house through his own front door, in between those wild geraniums in the window boxes. It's a far cry from the Crow Club and its polished black facade. He also has only a single flight of stairs to ascend, comfortably canted rather than as steep as those at the Slat.

Kaz thinks that he must be getting old, if he's thinking about things in these terms. Then again, to have made it past thirty, however barely, *does* count as old in the Barrel—you start eyeing the young blood with more cynicism than spirit of competition, taking bets at the tables on who will survive. Kaz would put good odds on his Dregs—mostly because he only takes the ones who have a fighting chance.

When he reaches the door of the bedroom that he shares with Inej more often than not, the room appears empty. There is, however, a sharpness to the air, a pricking of his nerves, that would suggest that this is not the case. Time has, if anything, sharpened his sense for her.

He inhales deeply and steps fully over the threshold, laying his cane aside and setting it against the dresser with more precision than is strictly necessary. Slowly, methodically, he lays his coat over the back of the nearest chair, loosens his tie, and last, slips the gloves off—one finger at a time, each one a light tug, finally revealing the gleaming gold band of his wedding ring.

He lays the gloves down on the polished mahogany top of the dresser, not looking over his shoulder nor up into the mirror. He is thoroughly impatient. “What business, Wraith?” he asks, arching a single brow.

There is no answer, and yet he is certain that something—however minutely—has shifted. Trusting his senses where Inej is concerned, he looks up into the mirror.

She is seated on the desk behind him. She is wearing his shirt.

“Don’t call me Wraith,” she says. “Unless you intend to mix business and pleasure.”

Kaz’s mouth has gone completely dry. She has one of her broad sailor’s belts laced around her waist, the shirt unbuttoned most of the way down to it. Her hair is loose and flowing in swaths over her shoulders, and she is smiling a secretive, closed-lipped smile.

“Oh?” says Kaz, trying to retain some facade of composure and/or intelligence.

She keeps smiling, but he can’t shake the feeling that she’s laughing at him. “Jordan is at the university,” she says. “Tracking down her friend.”

“Alone?” Kaz says sharply, turning around to face her and stopping rather more shortly than he intended. To see her reflection is one thing, but to fully face the unashamed radiance of what she is, to savor every detail—his eyes don’t know where to land.

“Well armed, and having sworn up and down to me that she’ll get out if things look sour,” Inej says, ghosting her fingers along her bare golden thigh. Kaz swallows hard.

“What are the chances of her keeping that promise?”

“Remind me, Kaz, why you don’t give your word very often?” She nearly whispers his name, letting it ride on her breath, and he takes two unsteady steps towards the desk, drawn by an unrelenting pull, like a hook in his gut.

Why does he avoid making promises? Because he may be wicked and ruthless and cruel, but he will keep to any deal he strikes. He runs his thumb along the edge of his ring.

“Besides,” Inej says slowly, a sliver of a smile touching her perfect lips, “Even then, it’ll be an hour yet before she’s back.”

Kaz crosses the rest of the way to the desk without hesitation. He pauses there, gripping the back of the chair, looking into her face.

Looking at his wife. There’s something strangely giddy about the thought that has yet to fade. Her lips are slightly parted, her eyes dark and impossibly deep. He puts a hand to the side of her face, his wrist and the soft part of his palm hovering over the point of her pulse. And he, Kaz thinks, has never felt more alive.

She lists forward, brushes her lips over his, as gentle as the moth’s-wing brush of their first kiss. They’ve grown braver in the intervening years, by bits and pieces, but this feels as if

they're standing on the edge of something, looking into the chasm below. She may pray that her Saints will let her fly instead of falling, but what does he have to save him?

When he opens his eyes, the answer is staring back him.

He straightens to pull the chair towards him and slide into it. Now he's sitting slightly beneath Inej from her perch on the desk, bracketed by her legs. If he must fall, he is trusting her to guide him over the edge.

He slides a hand up her calf and draws in a faltering breath. There is so much of her. He's overwhelmed with it, but not like he's drowning—it's excess, indulgence, intoxication, reckless and euphoric. She bends over him, her hair falling in curtains around their faces, the unbuttoned shirt gaping further over the subtle valley of her chest and almost sliding entirely from her shoulder.

He wraps his other arm around her waist, fingertips curling against her spine. She gives a soft gasp, eyes sliding briefly shut. Kaz's breath catches in his throat; he has never been particularly exhilarated by danger, but this is something else altogether.

Inej's hand comes to rest at his shoulder, and she looks like she's going to say something, but then he sees the determination shift on her face and knows that she won't. Instead, she crosses the bare distance that remains and puts her lips over his.

For a moment, the world eclipses. His senses funnel. He presses forward, his hand slipping upward from its resting place at the crook of her knee; her eyelashes flutter against his cheeks. Inej's arms wrap over his shoulders, and his breath gets shallow and ragged.

Where his kiss is rough with want and inexperience, hers is slow, tantalizing. Inej knows how to kiss. It shouldn't strike him like that, but it does—that he is the one lacking experience here, that she knows what angle of her head, what maneuvers of her teeth and tongue will please a man. It's enough to make him move sharply away from the kiss, to look her in her reddened face.

"Do what you want with me," he says, his chest rising and falling more than the exertion warrants.

The red gets redder—burgundy silk, summer wine. "Kaz." The way she says his name makes him want to kiss her again. He could spend the rest of his life doing nothing else, living on that summer-wine blush and the champagne bubbles of her laugh.

"Don't do what you think I'll like. I don't know what I like." He grasps a length of her hair in one hand, suddenly desperate to hold some part of her, to reassure himself that she won't vanish as soon as he closes his eyes. "I do know," he corrects himself. The words feel clumsy, even as simple as they are. "I like you."

Inej answers him by leaning across the distance and closing her mouth over his again, sweet and intoxicating and alive, alive, *alive* . No one could mistake that, not when all the signs of life are here—their thundering heartbeats, their breaths rising in pants to Kaz's ears, their

skin, so much of it, all hot and flushed. His mind is so full of her that it's blissfully empty, but for the thought— *This. Yes, this* .

<>

In the end, it never becomes too much. There is an undeniable sense of victory in parting simply because it feels natural, both of them safe and sane—and far better, even.

Inej's head rests on his shoulder. They have ended up sitting on the floor by the window, backs against the worn paneling of the wall,, which perhaps he'll regret when he has to stand up later, but then maybe he just never will.

"Wylan is expanding further into the spice market," she says.

It seems like a non sequitur, but Kaz is aware that she is laying a trail for him. Rather than predicting the next pieces and solving the puzzle, he lets her draw it out; the longer she takes to explain, the longer he can pretend that the truth is something else.

"He's replacing a handful of the ships in his fleet with some made after the Shu model," she says. "Longer, narrower hulls."

If Kaz were forced to guess, he would say that one of the ships being replaced was a warship well-suited for a pirate. Since he's not being forced, he says, "The Exchange is prophesying good fortune for spice traders, but they're no more of an oracle than any god."

"They ought to be prophesying bad fortune for slave traders," says Inej.

"Don't give away tips like that when you could sell them," says Kaz, but the rasp of his voice sounds hollower than usual, and he knows it.

"Kaz," she says quietly, plaintively.

He shuts his eyes. She is a ship and he is an anchor, and the only kind of love that he has will crush her under his weight if he allowed it to settle. Worse yet, it will trap her.

So he doesn't ask her how long. He doesn't ask her when. He doesn't even ask her to stay. He just slides his hand into hers and remains there, watching through the window as the clouds sink lower in the sky.

Chapter End Notes

so after 60+ chapters of hinting at how much they want each other, I finally wrote some mildly spicy kanej. It's going to get a little past this eventually, like into implied territory, but I am as figuratively allergic to fanfic spice as I am to actual spice, so...yeah.

do you guys remember the citrus scale? this would be like, what, an orange? tell me in the comments XD (and if you don't remember the citrus scale, tell me that too! or yell about how hot inej is! or tell me that my metaphors are incredibly unnecessary! whatever you want to say)

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan comes home and decides to stay.

Chapter Notes

I have thoroughly enjoyed remembering the citrus scale with you guys, lol. I wrote some truly awful fics on FFN back in the day, so I'm glad that I was able to take *something* good from that experience.

Book_Junkie007, kaz's defining characteristic is how completely gone he is for his wife. in this essay I will—

LolaBleu, thank you for the lovely comment! I definitely enjoyed writing that chapter.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I constantly feel like just quoting your comments back to you in order to yell about them. "when home means so many places, staying at one will always keep you from another." THIS. just this.

Raphale, to be honest, one of my favorite things about kanej is the weight that the little things carry. everything has a certain softness to it because of how hard they've worked to achieve every step.

the_purple_duck, ALL THE LOVE!

KiwisAndTea, kaz is 100% all or nothing. he never does anything by halves. and I think part of that lies in how certain he is of himself and his abilities, but he also has a certain tendency to just take the risk and not look back.

ThatUselessHuman, kaz is indeed a simp, and so are the rest of us.

thephonyqueenofengland, hmm, what WILL jordan think of inej leaving? that would make a good chapter, now, wouldn't it? ;)

pancakes507, I do love me a good metaphor or two. and kanej just lend themselves to metaphors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan has been doing her best to stay out of the rain, but as she gets back through the Financial district, this becomes less important to her. She isn't one of those sappy sorts of people who go around with songs in their hearts—sunflowers, always turning their faces to the light, and too blinded by it to notice when you've snatched their valuables—but she does feel, in a certain way, like she's dancing.

She keeps thinking of Alby and having to bite back a smile. He really hasn't changed very much, and there's something oddly comforting about that. It makes her feel like she can trust him, which is probably one of those thoughts that drives teenagers to do stupid things, but she can't seem to shake the feeling. He was just so ready to be on board with whatever she asked of him, even as scared as he looked. And he agreed to see her again.

She practically skips along the slender spine of a row of offices, then launches herself over a narrow gap to flatten her body to a sharply pitched slope and crawl sideways along it. Ketterdam is a whole different city from above. The rooftops mirror and mingle with the canals, sometimes matching them and other times contradicting. She has learned to gauge a leap or a drop, although she still isn't exactly *likely* to avoid the risk and just use her climbing spikes and go another way. She was laid up with a twisted ankle a few months ago, not for long really, but for too long as far as she is concerned, and yet she'd still prefer to have the fun.

It isn't something she's been able to explain to Kaz. For a ruthless gang leader who talks like he's got a death wish, her da is annoyingly cautious when it comes to her. *So* not fair.

But how could he ever understand? He hasn't and won't, probably, had that feeling of leaping over the canal from ten or twenty feet up, getting a faceful of wind and feeling, for a second, weightless. Whatever she's risking by doing it, she'll take those odds.

(Just because Jordan knows better than to gamble at the tables, doesn't mean she won't find other ways.)

She slides down the steep, rain-slick pitch of a shop roof halfway down the length of the canal, swinging over the lip of the gutter and landing with knees bent to soften the impact. She hits the cobbles and steps up to the edge of the canal, just in time to hop one of the passenger gondels that'll carry anyone—more tourists than locals, though—for a coin or two. Jordan isn't here to *spend* money, however, and she is her own vanishing act, ensuring that her weight doesn't shift or rock the small craft. As far as her fellow passengers and the gondolier are concerned, she's been in their midst all along.

To her delight, Jordan has found herself a group that's intent on sightseeing, their eyes wide as moons as they goggle up at some of the city's most uninteresting buildings. Some of them even have their hands protectively over their pockets.

Jordan, however, is feeling like a challenge today, so she doesn't start with the easiest marks. Instead, the next time they round a bend in the canal, heading out towards the Zelver district, she lurches forward into the woman in front of her, briefly making a grab for the woman's hand as if for support.

When her mark whips around, Jordan shrinks back, curling in on herself with shame. “I’m so sorry, ma’am,” she says, head ducked. “I’m still getting used to the currents.”

The woman still looks vaguely irritated, but she gives a gentle sigh. “I understand, dear,” she says. “Are you visiting as well?”

Jordan admires the woman’s coat. She wishes she could figure out how to get it off of her without the woman realizing. “I just moved here,” she says, her knees turned in slightly. “Again, apologies.”

“It can be hard to adjust,” the woman reassures her before turning back around.

As soon as the pigeon isn’t looking, Jordan examines her haul—several heavy rings, probably real gold and gemstones, and a plain gold band that she figures must be a wedding ring. Inej would probably give her one of those cross looks for having taken the wedding ring with the rest of them, but as far as Jordan is concerned, if two people need a bit of metal to keep them together, then maybe they shouldn’t have it in the first place.

By the time she slips off of the gondel and onto the broad main thoroughfare of the Zelver district, her pockets are considerably heavier and those of her fellow passengers rather lighter. She’d have liked to leave some decoys behind, but since the whole opportunity was a pleasant surprise, she hadn’t been prepared. Still, she suspects that by the the time the pigeons realize what they’re missing, it will be too late for them to suspect the sweet young girl who’d so briefly been among them.

As Jordan strolls down the street, one hand in her pocket, she bounces some of her newfound treasures in the other hand, testing their weight. She *could* give them to Kaz, count it as a win for the Dregs, but the gang is plenty rich already. The only people who don’t go to the Crow Club anymore are the ones who want to be different and contrary, or the ones who don’t like that much black and red. And even then, the Silver Six is there to serve the latter, and they’ll all end up at the Crow and Cup eventually, whether to celebrate their wins or take the edge off their losses.

Yes, this particular set of prizes is going into Jordan’s personal pocket. It was, after all, rightfully—if not honestly—earned. She flicks one of the rings up and entertains herself for a moment by making it dance over her knuckles.

It’s late enough in the afternoon that most everyone on her street is shut up in their houses, though there are a few women sitting on their porches who give her disapproving looks. She knows they don’t like her haircut, and wonders what they’d say if they knew that they had Kaz for company in that.

(She thinks again of how careful he is about her, even up to not wanting her to look like she’s got anything to do with him. She had just pointed out that half the city has their hair shaved on the sides the same way, and nobody’s assuming that he has anything to do with *that* .)

The long part of her hair is still securely gathered into a braid, which she unpins from its tight coil, letting it roll down her back as she hops up the steps to her front door and lets herself in. The house is oddly quiet, dim afternoon sunlight filtering through the lacy white curtains, and

Jordan automatically silences her steps, flicking the small blade that she keeps up her sleeve down into her grasp.

She hasn't lost the instinct to call for her parents, but she forces herself to ignore it. Instead, she slowly approaches the stairs, and, seeing no one, starts up them. A staircase is a difficult place to get caught in a fight, but she can always go up the walls if there's nowhere else to run.

The single hallway upstairs doesn't leave much room to run or hide—two bedrooms and an office/library—which is both a good thing and a bad thing for Jordan. She starts down towards Kaz's office (the one he doesn't use that often, because if he's working, he's probably at the Slat), trusting that the stuff in her room is well enough secured, and as she approaches, she notices the door is ajar.

Huh. Maybe he's actually in there.

Jordan flattens her back to the door and nudges it open, and sure enough—it's just her da behind one of the low bookcases, looking over a map.

A map?

"Where's Inej?" Jordan questions.

From behind him, she sees his head lift. He's not surprised that she's back. Of course. "Where were you?"

He already knows exactly where she was, Jordan can tell, but she'll play his game. "University district. Got some real gold off of this one lady on the—"

"Doing what?"

Jordan rolls her eyes. It's a new skill that she is making full use of. " *Da.* "

"Jordan." He almost sounds like he's making fun of her. Maybe he is.

"You know already," she complains, finally stepping away from the door and letting it shut.

Kaz makes another mark on the map. Even just looking at the back of his head, she can imagine him raising his eyebrows at her. "Maybe I don't," he said. "Or I want to see if you'll tell me."

"It's not like you raised me to be honest," Jordan protests. "And you didn't answer my question. Where's Inej?"

Kaz doesn't exactly give in, but he doesn't retort, either. "Fifth Harbor," he replies.

Jordan steps fully into the room and goes over to lean on the heavy mahogany bookcase. The map is a large-scale one of the True Sea, with dotted lines swirling all over it and notes in both of her parents' handwriting. "What's she doing at Fifth Harbor?"

Kaz doesn't answer, which is an answer in itself. Jordan's eye catches on his left hand, the way he's rubbing his thumb over his ring, spinning it back and forth.

She wonders if he knows his tells. It almost doesn't feel right for her to. But she can't help noticing what he taught her to notice. It's like that proverb Inej told her, one time—you can't train a falcon, then expect it not to hunt.

"She's leaving again," Jordan says slowly. She looks out the window to the distant, deep green line of the harbor, smeared by fog—as if she could see Inej and the ship that's going to take her away.

Maybe she's being selfish. But she's only fourteen still—shouldn't that be allowed?

She looks back at Kaz, who has followed her gaze. "Is she leaving *now* ?"

"No," he says, a strange unaffectedness in his voice that Jordan ought to be used to, but still finds herself bothered by. "Just making preparations."

"And when were you going to tell me," Jordan asks, folding her arms over each other, "if I hadn't asked?"

Her da clasps his hands together in his lap, still twisting his ring back and forth. "I knew you would," he says.

Jordan bites back a sigh. Maybe she's just being irritated with him because it's easier than facing the fact that Inej is leaving. But that's just so like him—that there's only what is, so what's the point in dwelling on could-have-beens?

"Maybe I could go with her," she says hopefully.

Kaz's voice falls like a guillotine. "You have school."

"I'd rather learn to be a pirate than to do math."

Kaz doesn't say anything; he just pushes his chair back, takes up his cane, and walks away, out into the hall.

Jordan trots after him. "Where are you going?"

"Fifth Harbor."

She scowls. "What happened to nobody seeing you together?"

He vanishes around the corner that leads down the stairs, but she still hears his voice. "I didn't say they'll see me."

Jordan runs another few steps, then stops in the middle of the hallway. There's a tightness in her chest that she can't explain—or really doesn't want to. And even though the sun is fighting through clouds and smog as stubbornly as ever, the hallway seems to have grown dimmer, the black walnut cladding on the walls having lost its shine.

The house feels very big, and Jordan feels very small, and suddenly she realizes that maybe she just doesn't want to be alone.

Is that it? Is that why Kaz left, why he said no?

Jordan stares at the open doorway to the stairs, the empty space where her da just was.

He doesn't want me to leave.

That should make sense. That shouldn't be so hard to believe. After all, she knows he loves her, at least as much as he can or is supposed to. But there are pieces of that that are still falling into place, and she feels, just now, like she's finally understanding what it really means.

And even though she still sort of feels like crying, a smile creeps across Jordan's face; it's a novelty, this feeling of mattering, of having people who care about her—so much, even, that they're too afraid to say it. Their family doesn't just mean something to her. To all of them, it is the safest place to be. And even if it's not a place to stay, it's always a place to return to.

Chapter End Notes

My power has been out, so I wrote this in between taking a psychology test and also the morning before posting it. The hurricane is mostly gone now, though, so I wasn't about to leave you without your weekly update. <3

Inej

Chapter Summary

The family goes to the harbor together.

Chapter Notes

Surprise, surprise, everyone—I have returned! And just in time for the Grishaverse revival. I haven't stopped thinking about that Kanej still from s2 and would like it to be tattooed on my forehead. Now, before ados are in any way furthered, I must of course give you your long-overdue shout-outs~

camelliawrites, as much as Kaz has grown, he is still very tight-fisted with his affection because it's such a vulnerability for him. For Jordan to have that epiphany changes and deepens their relationship a lot—just when they're going to be on their own without Inej in the middle.

Book_Junkie007, you're absolutely right that Kaz and Inej have fought for Jordan to have a real childhood, unlike theirs. And she doesn't realize that, because to them, preserving her childhood means not telling her everything about their respective pasts. Of course it's going to come out eventually, but they'd rather that be later than sooner. Bonus shout-out to bloodofkingsonmytrousers and cameliawrites for writing a whole thread about this and making the author cry <3

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I love you so much as a reader. first of all, your thoughts on your re-read meant the world to me. second, yes, the biggest conflict jordan and kaz are going to have is that his desire to give her a real childhood means she's more at ease with taking risks, which of course pokes the trauma, as it were.

KiwisAndTea, I am very much looking forward to writing some Jordan and Kaz bonding, since Jordan has spent so much time with Inej, being a pirate.

Adriennezzz, hey, what kind of AO3 writer would I be if I let a little hurricane stop me?

thephonyqueenofengland, getting to write them doing regular family things owns my entire heart. it shows just how far they've come <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This time, they go to the harbor together.

The sun is barely up, but the quay is already busy, dockworkers calling to each other and crates grinding against worn boards and, further out, a sturdy cargo ship slowly breaking the horizon line, the rest of its fleet sure to follow. Gulls call through the persistent fog; if Inej listens carefully, she imagines she can hear crows, too.

Her little crow—not nearly as little now, and there's an ache that comes with realizing it—marks their pace up ahead, scampering up a pyramid of wooden crates and sitting on top with her legs dangling over the side. Kaz, fog clinging to the shoulders of his heavy coat like a cloak, shields his eyes to look up at her and gives Inej a rather exasperated glance as if to say, *Why?*

"She has the sky in her blood and the wind in her bones," Inej murmurs, watching Jordan stand up on the crates and stretch her arms up into the dusty gray sky, just because she can. It was something her uncle had often said about Inej herself, when she was a little girl testing the limits of the wire and the swings.

"That's right," says Kaz, arching an eyebrow, looking almost amused. He has his hat tipped low over his face, but not so low that Inej still can't see the reflection of a bird's dark shape in the dim shine of his eyes. "You have to leave me with a surplus of proverbs so I won't want for them while you're gone."

Ahead of them, Jordan sits back down on the crates, leaning out towards the stone walk that fronts the harbor, her plait lifted in a sudden swell of wind. Inej tears her eyes away from Jordan and chances a look at Kaz. There is a lightness in his voice, his expression masked by faux calm, but she knows him too well by now. She doesn't need to say it. She has been his keeper of secrets for long enough to keep this one.

"I'll sign my letters with them," she says, her eye catching on a gull as it swoops low to the docks to gobble up some scrap or other dropped by a cargo run long past. Everything has to survive on scavenging in this city.

"And I'll welcome them," Kaz returns, the shine of his dark eyes muted by the overcast dawn. "Anything to make her less impossible to keep track of."

It's easy to forget that Jordan wasn't born to her and Kaz, the amount that she takes after the two of them. Inej knows exactly who is to blame for her daughter's desire to wander. "You learned to find me," she says. "I believe you can learn again."

"And you've always been the believing type." The corner of Kaz's mouth hooks slightly, in some echo of the time when he used to rile her by mocking her faith. They are both much more patient, these days.

They are standing at the top of the quay now, away from the people below, away from eyes that might question the sight of Dirtyhands standing alongside a pirate and a girl not yet grown. Inej wishes he could walk to her ship with her, all the way down to the berth, and then perhaps even keep going—leave Ketterdam at their backs, let the harbor take what the city has made of them.

“Come with me,” she says softly, just like she did in his office now a dozen years before. The salt breeze rustles past them, and somewhere far off, sailors’ voices rise and fall away. She reaches for his hand.

“Inej.” He says only her name, just that, and even though he takes her hand in his own bare, soft one, she knows it’s as close to a farewell as he can give her. The ripple of dark waves is reflected in his eyes. He doesn’t refuse her outright, but it’s enough. She should have known better.

“I’m sorry,” she says with a melancholy smile. “That wasn’t fair to you.”

He is silent for a long while. But that’s the way Kaz has always been—he doesn’t second-guess or double back on his words, and sometimes he doesn’t offer them at all. But the ones he does say, they mean something. Even if the meaning is nothing like what he said. “I thought the Suli didn’t apologize.”

“But the Kerch do.”

She is a Kerch citizen now. Even if she is a piecework of the many places she’s been and lived, even if there are days she would like to leave it behind, this city has left things with her that she can’t cast off. One could say, as people had, that she has spent too long in the dark and brought something back. But it isn’t Ketterdam itself that draws her to endlessly return.

Kaz is quiet today, but she expected little else. Anything they could say will come out sounding like *goodbye,* and he’s never been one for farewells. Many things have changed about Kaz in the years she’s known him, but not this.

He doesn’t say goodbye. He just lets go.

“I have to do this,” she says—to him, to herself, to the wind. She has to move soon or she’ll never leave.

Kaz’s voice is saltworn-rough, as battered as if the sea has eroded it. “I know.” He looks to Jordan, sitting on top of the crates, a girl-shaped smudge against the silver sky.

He doesn’t have to say it. *She isn’t the only one made of sky and wind.*

Inej wonders if drawing it out is making it worse, if she should lift anchor, in earnest and in metaphor, and forget the words and gestures of parting. He knew when he married her that she couldn’t stay forever. But she wants to leave him something to remember her by.

She reaches into one of the hidden pockets in her ivory blouse and withdraws the pearl teardrop earring. “Remember this?”

“I’m not old enough to be senile, treasure.” That slight amusement touches Kaz’s face again, smoothing away the pensiveness, if only for a moment. Inej can only pray that it’s genuine.

“Fine, then,” she says, a glitter alighting in her eyes. “Would you put it in for me, thief of mine?”

Kaz looks like he's holding back something close to a smile—a sight that Inej cherishes, however selfishly, because she knows that it is reserved for her alone. "You're not old enough to be blind, either."

"No one ever accused you of being a gentleman."

"I've told you that myself, Mrs. Rietveld," Kaz says as he moves to stand slightly behind her. Inej doesn't think she'll ever get used to that name, and she's hard-pressed not to smile at the sound of it; she has never truly stopped keeping his secrets, and this one is *theirs.*

She passes the earring to Kaz, back over her shoulder, and looks up at Jordan, who is waving down at them from the crates. Inej thinks she sees Jordan make a disgusted face at how close they're standing.

"Come home soon," Kaz says, his breath tickling her ear, "and we'll thoroughly embarrass our daughter."

Inej catches her lower lip under her teeth to hide a smile, although she knows she's probably wearing a pleased blush. Despite the years of struggle, there is something to be said for exploring new areas of their relationship at a later point than most.

And it doesn't stop her from savoring, in a completely different way, the moments like this, when Kaz's touch is terribly soft and awfully gentle. He lingers over the action, as though being particularly careful, but his hands sill brush her skin as he does it—the nape of her neck, the base of her ear, just beneath her jaw. The barest touches, fully avoidable, and yet.

Inej leans back, just slightly, leans into him. "I've been tricked," says Kaz, his arm entwining around her middle, the rough burr of his voice stirring the small hairs on the back of Inej's neck. A pleasant shiver runs up her spine. "Dirtyhands thoroughly outsmarted."

If he keeps talking in that deep, rumbling voice of his, Inej will be sorely tempted to march him back home and put those hands to better use. As it is, she turns to return the embrace, to rest her head against his chest. He is an anchor, his body warm and solid in her arms.

That's the trouble, isn't it? He is an anchor. And she cannot be held to shore.

Kaz's fingers brush under her chin, raising her face to his. When she tilts her head back, his bends toward her, two sides of the same movement, and he rests his forehead against hers.

Inej fights the urge to close her eyes. "If you write Jesper to tell him I'll be missed around Zelverstraat, I will be very put out, *me vrano.* "

From beneath her lashes, she thinks she sees Kaz smile. She doesn't know why, but this day seems to be reminding her, more than anything, of that morning on the docks, holding his hand for the first time. She can't seem to stop coming back to all that they said, still as clear as the day it happened.

"I didn't marry Jesper," he says.

Inej tucks her head back against his shoulder, the brim of his hat gently bumping her temple. "So you *will* miss me?"

It's that simple, and that quick; Kaz's hold on her drops away, and he doesn't step back, but she feels that he's pulled away all the same. *Well,* Inej thinks ruefully, *I did want the leaving to be easier.* It's just that sometimes she gets too used to this comfort and forgets how much he's fighting, forgets how her words can hit too close to home.

She's trying so hard not to say goodbye that she's saying all the wrong things, instead.

She touches a hand to the earring's cold, smooth surface. Just up ahead, Jordan leaps down from the crates, landing in a crouch, and hurries over to them, her steps almost silent even on the wind-worn boards of the quay. "Are you done being gross?"

"Never," Inej replies. Not after all they've overcome, just to be able to. Not even now. "How do I look?"

"Like a pirate," Jordan says loyally, but Inej finds herself looking to Kaz. He remains more or less stoic as the salt breeze lifts the hem of his heavy coat, and she isn't surprised that he doesn't say anything; the look in his dark eyes is all the answer that she needs. She almost hates how easily he forgives her.

The silence takes on an odd tone, and it takes Inej a moment to realize that Jordan is giving Kaz a look.

Something passes over his face, and then, "It's missing something," he says—in a tone that Inej recognizes. It takes her a moment to place it—it's his actor's voice, the mark of the master con man, the one he uses to set up some ruse.

She casts a suspicious look between him and Jordan, and realizes that Jordan is hiding something behind her back. "What are you two up to?"

For a child of criminals, Jordan's skills at lying are mixed, and she is doing an admirable but unsuccessful job of trying not to laugh. She looks to Kaz before saying, "We have done you the honor of acquiring you a new hat." With a flourish, she reveals a deep mauve captain's hat from behind her back, complete with a black-plumed feather.

Inej stares between the two of them. Jordan isn't even trying to hide how proud she looks, and Kaz—he looks exactly the way he always has after a job well done, a self-satisfied air about him that's impossible to place. It used to infuriate her. In this moment, it fills her with a strange, crawling sense of something like guilt.

"I can't believe you remembered that," Inej murmurs, picking up the hat and turning it back and forth. She may not be a master of appraisal, but she's learned to gauge an object's worth, and the hat is beautifully crafted.

"Jordan," Kaz says drily, "your mother thinks I've lost my faculties." But there is amusement in his eyes when they catch what light there is, and Inej realizes that she is forgiven.

“A shame that would be,” she remarks softly, trying the hat on. It is, of course, a perfect fit, and she has a feeling that if she asked Kaz how he managed to pull this off, he’d never tell her. Then again, perhaps this is one answer that she doesn’t mind him holding onto.

“Well, Ketterdam would still have its brightest mind,” Jordan says smugly, settling her hands on her hips. A gull squalls as it swoops low over her head, and she makes a face at it.

“I don’t envy you two, trying to fit both of your egos inside the house,” says Inej, and only when Kaz’s lips turn up slightly does she realize that she is exactly mimicking Jordan’s posture. There is a grain of stubbornness in her, so instead of moving, she simply gives an exasperated sigh.

Somehow, she expects words to follow it, but none rise to her tongue. The levity has gone still in the morning air; they all know they’re losing the battle to keep their farewells at bay. The rush of waves against the stone wall some yards ahead seems to have grown louder, as if the current is getting stronger, pulling her onward before she can bow out or resist.

It’s not just about leaving Kaz and the life they’ve built here—the piano, and the geraniums in the window boxes, and making *hutspot* for dinner instead of breakfast and pretending to like it when they add too much water because they made it together. She’s begun to think that she could feel caged by anything with walls. But more still, Jordan is fourteen now. And it’s not that she doesn’t trust Jordan to be smarter than she ever was, or that she doesn’t trust Kaz to protect her, but…

But who’s to say that, one summer morning, Jordan won’t decide to sleep in?

Every age will have its echoes for them. She doesn’t think she’s seen Kaz so utterly dismantled as when Jordan was ill with a fever. She saw the blind panic in his face when Jordan crawled out of the harbor at nine. He nearly burned every bridge he’d built to reach Jordan when she was thirteen and getting friendly with a Rollins. And what about seventeen? Will Jordan believe, as they did, that she must take the world in her fists and make it her own, at any cost?

The proud look has slipped from Jordan’s face. “Mama?” She calls Inej by that name less and less these days.

As her answer, Inej pulls Jordan into her arms, burying her face in her clever girl’s soft, dark hair. Jordan is quick to wrap her arms around Inej in return, squeezing even tighter as if trying to one-up her. Too bad the Wraith is stronger than she looks; her little crow won’t win that game just yet.

Inej doesn’t have to lean down very far to whisper into her ear anymore. “Be careful, *Meja.* ”

Jordan’s small hands curl against her back, as if to keep her from pulling away. “I will. Really. I promise.”

Inej breathes in her daughter’s scent, blinks away a sting in her eyes that she blames on the salt breeze off the harbor. She lifts her head just slightly and looks to Kaz, and she recognizes the look on his face before she’s really even seen it.

She had known, somehow, what she was going to find when she searched his expression; it's the tight set of his jaw, the slight tension around his mouth, she shutters opening behind his bitter-coffee eyes to show more than he means to. It's the look he gave her when she was injured on this very wharf at not yet seventeen, and again in the Geldrenner suite; at the inn in Lij, when he'd wanted more than she could give; every time over fifteen years that his eyes have moved to her lips, and then inevitably away.

Just as soon as they've conquered the need, he will once again have to love her from a distance.

She lifts an arm from Jordan's shoulders, holds it out to him. *While we still can.*

His eyes raise to meet hers, his grip tightening on the head of his cane. Inej is reminded of a group hug so long ago that it doesn't feel real, of Nina calling him to join.

Though Inej has tried to teach her patience, Jordan is more stubborn than the both of them combined, and while it worries her parents more than they will ever admit, sometimes it does them good. Now, she puts her arm out, too, and pulls Kaz into the hug.

Stiffly at first, but slowly relaxing, he joins the tight embrace.

They are a tangle of arms, of hearts beating against one another. A sailor's knot, made to withstand every lashing wind and savage storm. Inej imagines herself and Kaz spreading dark wings over Jordan, daring anyone to come close.

And if nothing else, their girl has her own claws.

Should anyone be up early enough to walk by, they would never know they're passing a murder of crows—dusted with morning light, alone on the quay, the city's most savage monsters look more ordinary than they've ever thought they could play at.

Inej looks up, and the fog has gone from gray to silver, a pale light crossing the sky in brushstrokes. They've made it to morning, and it's time for her to go.

Just when she starts to pull away, Kaz's arm tightens its hold across her back. His lips move close to her ear. "I..."

"You don't have to say it," Inej replies, before he can finish. "I shouldn't have had to ask."

She steps back, and her mind takes in her family. She already knows there will be days, out on the True Sea, when remembering them will be the only thing that keeps her moving forward. Jordan, her brave girl, stands straight as an arrow, her long braid coiled at her neck, shaved short on the sides in an unmistakable match to her father. And Kaz—

Once, she would have been at a loss to know what he's thinking. But the slight lift of his strong brow, the ghost of a smile on his lips, tells her all that she needs.

"You both write to me," she says sternly. Catching Kaz's eye, she adds, "And preferably do it sober."

His smile grows, just barely. No one else might even have noticed. “How else will I come up with new names to call you?”

“Spare Ketterdam and devote some of your scheming to that instead, *me vrano* ,” Inej replies, straightening her hat. She squares her shoulders and turns toward the dock, toward her ship lying ready in its berth. “If you need inspiration, I’m sure our library carries romances.”

And maybe it’s foolish of her, the same girl living in her heart who never quite stopped believing the words *kings and queens* , but as her feet start to move, she thinks, *none of them could be as great as ours.*

Chapter End Notes

I will be thinking about kanej pet names for the next 8-10 business days.

so yes, I am back from hiatus, and what better way to return than with my trademarked blend of bittersweet family fluff. there may still be some off weeks as I grapple with my outline and try to get it to listen to me, but otherwise we should be back on a more-or-less regular schedule. say hi in the comments, or throw some theories back and forth as to what is happening in that kanej picture.

also: 96 DAYS UNTIL MARCH 16!!!

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby decides to be brave. He can't know just how much courage this will take.

Chapter Notes

It was so wonderful to see how many people came back, and the new people who are joining us already! Welcome to the family, or welcome back <3 Sorry I was late responding to comments this week; it's that time of year where there are bugs going around, and I haven't gotten out of bed in the last several days XD. So here are your well-awaited shout-outs!

itsyagirlkath, I missed all of you! It's lovely having everyone come back <3

cameliawrites, that family hug has been a long time coming, and it means so much. It speaks to how they've been able to protect Jordan so that she doesn't *have* to become as dangerous as they are—she has that choice.

toovrede, I'm happy to see you back, too!

thephonyqueenofengland, I like to think that the blend of sailors and crows imagery shows the harmony that they've come to work in when it comes to protecting Jordan.

KiwisAndTea, I really can't help it with the throwbacks. Sometimes I wonder if the characters would realistically remember this stuff, but the early moments in their relationship carried so much weight even if they seemed trivial on the surface.

addsomehoney, after this many chapters, one is bound to end up with a lot of motifs and moving pieces, but honestly I like that it gives me so much to play with.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, your comments are always so stunning and thoughtful. I really like the point that kaz didn't say goodbye, but he also didn't let go; he has clearly grown as a person, but not so much that it's changed who he is.

Not another confused platypus!, your username is fantastic. Also, if you have any crane wives song recs, I'll be glad to hear them.

Blue_daisies, I'm glad you're enjoying it <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's not, necessarily, that Alby likes routine and predictability—on the contrary, after being so relatively sheltered for so long, he likes to have some adventure in his life. However, he's still starting to feel like Jordan has personally dedicated herself to slowly chipping years off of his lifespan.

She has an uncanny talent for picking her moments, too. Case in point: Today, Alby is returning to his dorm after a grueling economics lecture, his brain feeling practically liquefied, using what remains of it to work on a plan that works best with some forewarning. Under the circumstances, then, he isn't exactly on the lookout for spies-in-training perched on the wall outside.

More fool him, apparently, because just as soon as he pushes open the heavy oak door and steps into the room, Jordan drops down into the window frame, lacking any kind of apparent rope or harness.

Alby drops his books. "Aye, Ghezen! Where'd you—" He gets particularly Kaelish when he's agitated or flustered, and when it comes to Jordan, he tends to be both.

Jordan gives him an unimpressed look. "The wall. *Duh.* " She doesn't make the remark he's expecting about him being the one at university, so isn't he supposed to be the smart one, et cetera, but he's pretty sure it's implied.

Well, he's feeling remarkably more alert now. "You could've warned me."

"When have I ever?" Jordan hooks her hands on top of the window frame and sits down on the sill. She looks…comfortable? Confident?

Good, a voice in his head whispers. *Really, really good.*

Alby quickly starts picking up the books that he dropped. Apparently his guard is down in more ways than one today.

It bothers him, somehow, that he didn't realize she was there; he's developed a pretty good sense for Jordan's presence, even when he can't see her. Sure, it's not a perfect science, but he would've liked to think that he's gotten it fairly well-honed by now. "There's a first time for everything."

"Sure, but that takes all the fun out of it."

Alby knows that she's probably right, and he's just mad at himself, but he still doesn't say anything as he drops an egregiously heavy textbook onto the pile he's building. There are a thousand reasons that he's out of sorts at Jordan's sudden appearance, but none of them are her fault.

Jordan's voice rises from somewhere in his periphery, her tone hesitant. "Does it really bother you that much?"

Alby looks up at her warily. The sky is thick with fog behind her, no backlight to obscure her expression, and yet he still feels like he can't read it. "What?"

“Me showing up unannounced. I…sort of thought you liked it.” Jordan pushes her hood back from her hair and plays with the strings, looking down at her lap. It’s endlessly fascinating to him how she can be all bravado and risk one moment, then almost shy the next. If he let himself just sit and study it, study her, he’s afraid of how much time he would lose.

“I do,” he says, a little too quickly. He runs a hand aimlessly through his hair. It’s just that he had these plans for when he saw her again, and he was hoping he’d have the chance to gather his courage first. “No, sorry, I just…I wasn’t prepared, today.” He’s not sure he’s ever really prepared for her, for all that she is.

And just like that, the smile is back on her face, that spark of mischief back in her eyes. The room seems brighter. “Well, what am I here for, if not to keep you on your toes?”

Alby can’t help but laugh. “I guess you’re right,” he says, shaking his head slightly as he finishes piling his books onto his bed. He’ll put them—and his thoughts—into some semblance of order later, but as long as Jordan’s here, he has more important things to attend to.

Is he actually going to do this? They’ve certainly been spending enough time together—Jordan always seems to know when his roommate, Koen, isn’t around, and she’ll come in and sit on the floor by his bed to keep him company while he studies. Sometimes she’ll sharpen her concerning amount of knives, or look over some equally concerning documents that Alby is a little scared to ask about, but sometimes she’ll steal the quilt off of his bed and just sit there bundled in it, looking like a particularly dangerous pillow.

On those days, he doesn’t get much studying done.

Jordan hops off of the windowsill, vaulting neatly over the bookshelf without stirring so much as a leaf on Koen’s plants. “Of course I am. I’m always right.”

Alby tries for a smirk, but it comes out much softer and more affectionate than he means for it to. “I don’t know about that.” He turns around and sits on his bed, pushing the books out of the way.

To his surprise, instead of taking up her usual spot on the braided rug—a recent acquisition—Jordan slips over and sits on the bed next to him. Between Alby and the books, there isn't much room, and they're sitting close, pressed together at the hip and knee. He can feel his heartbeat without putting a hand to it. She really has no idea how difficult she’s making this, he thinks, but then again, it was never going to be easy. He should’ve known better than to have expectations, with Jordan. She’ll always break them and remake them into something unpredictable.

“I’m way too well-armed for you to be doubting me,” says Jordan, and although the words are teasing, he wonders if she means for it to sound as quiet and warm as it does.

Alby tries to think of something clever to say in return, but he makes the mistake of looking into her eyes as he does so, and his train of thought runs completely off of its proverbial tracks. Jordan blinks, slowly, her eyes going wide, and he wonders if he imagines that she’s leaning closer to him. His mouth has done dry.

“Jordan,” he says slowly, softly. “Can I ask you something?”

She blinks again, and to look at her right now, he would never have known how dangerous she is. “Sure.”

This was not part of the plan. Currently, however, he can't remember the plan. Jordan is a lover of adventure and risk, of taking chances, so maybe she'll like this better if he completely wings it. He'll have to hope so. “Would you want to…hang out? Somewhere that’s not here, I mean?” The moment breaks as panic takes over, and he’s rambling before he can stop himself. “Like, we could get coffee, or there’s that hot chocolate cart that you like? I think there are some little cafes on campus, or that one on the Lid? The Crow and Cup? I’ve heard it’s nice, but that only matters if you want to—hey—why are you laughing?”

Jordan is practically cackling, her head tipped back and her eyes crinkled shut. Alby wishes he could freeze the moment right here, at least until his pulse returns to normal levels, just to memorize that melody. He still wishes she would tell him what’s so funny.

“Nothing,” she gasps, wiping tears away from her eyes with another small giggle. “Nothing, it’s—” He must look more hurt than he realizes, because she looks at his face and hastily corrects herself. “It’s not you. I promise. All of those sound like great places. I’m just… familiar with some of the owners,” she adds, smiling more than she probably means to.

Alby is sure that there’s more to it, but right now he doesn’t care. “So is that a yes…?”

“Oh! Right!” Jordan bounces where she’s sitting on the mattress. “Yes, of course, yes!” Alby realizes that she’s blushing, which is possibly the best feeling he’s ever had. *I did that. I made her feel like that.*

And then Jordan is hugging him, which is a surefire way to stop his brain from working much at all. Alby freezes at first, but then, slowly, he puts his arms back around her, and it’s weird how calm he feels. He would have expected the usual symptoms, sparks and butterflies and all of that, but instead he’s just…really, really happy.

Maybe this is what it's supposed to feel like. Maybe this means that he did something right.

He would be just as happy to contemplate the implications from this position, holding her, but eventually, Jordan pulls back and sighs. “Oh, great,” she says. “I just realized something.”

The calm he'd felt seems to abandon him as quickly as it came, replaced by a thousand worries. There are so many things that could have gone wrong, and yet Alby's first thought is, *is it me? Did I do something wrong? Am I not good enough?*

Dreading the answer he might recieve, he asks, “What?”

Jordan gets up and gazes out the window, as if she could see across the whole city, even through the dense haze. Alby likes to imagine that she could if she wanted to. She looks back over her shoulder with a sheepish grin and says, “Now I get to tell my da.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the short length and any lack of quality, I wrote this while half-coherent with the flu lol

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan steals a necklace and runs a scheme.

Chapter Notes

hello everyone! apologies for the week off; it was Christmas and my internet was down, so I decided to take a break. however, I am BACK with a very long boi that I'm sure you have all been waiting for. speaking of things you've been waiting for, shout-outs!

Book_Junkie007, yeah...thrilled....

KiwisAndTea, I do love Alby. I think I relate to him the most out of the characters in this fic.

itsyagirlkath, yeah, Alby is gonna be in a bit of a situation when he learns who her dad is.

Not another confused platypus!, between you and my IRL friend, I'm going to become a full-on cranewives stan and I'm not mad about it.

thephonyqueenofengland, definitely not the crow club, but if they go to the restaurant that he owns, there will 100% be spies hanging around XD.

colourmornings, 3 days?? I hope you're okay XD. no, but seriously, I love binge readers with my entire soul and your comment made me cry a little.

MickeySalah76, yeahhh, hell of a ride is an understatement.

Princess_Zivaleh, right, because we know that Kaz is the best at coping skills...

cameliawrites, I certainly didn't think I'd be relating to Pekka's kid, but here we are, lol. I really like the point that you made about their relationship being both similar to the Kanej dynamic and different because they've had actual, stable childhoods.

Andhehe, hey, Jordan may be growing up, but she's still adorable.

simpforjamespotter, thank you for the kind wishes! I am indeed feeling a lot better (as evidenced by this chapter being about twice as long as the previous, I think, lol).

LolaBleu, we need to start a prayer circle for poor Alby.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I love the thought of the little spiders getting involved! I've been calling them jalby in my outline, but jorby is also good XD.

EyesJustReading, I don't know how you managed to read this in 12 hours, but I sincerely hope you're okay, lol. I am in awe.

Blue_daisies, they really are <3

eekabee, I hope you enjoy how this bit of the story develops!

Raphale, I am indeed feeling better! And yes, I think "overprotective" is the key word here.

andyoudoctor, I'm so happy to have you back! I was doing a little happy dance reading your comments this morning. Happy New Year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz Brekker's office contains a number of paintings. Most of them are essentially trophies, like the heads and bones that hunters decorate their walls with out in the country—those once called unstealable, those worth millions, those most cleverly appropriated. Two of them, however, are entirely opposite of stolen—that is to say, they were gifts.

One is in an austere, dark frame, hanging above the low bookcase that doubles as an almost unnaturally neat desk. It is done in oils, an exterior portrait of this very house, white lace curtains in the windows, wild geraniums bursting from the window boxes. Behind those curtains, a trio of silhouettes can be seen—the shape of a man at the piano with a small, slight woman just behind him, and in the other window, the shadow of a little girl running in to join them. The painting is signed in the lower corner with an intricate swirl rather than a written signature; were one to turn over the frame, however, Kaz himself has attached a card to the back that simply reads *W. V. E.—13 ZV.*

The other painting sits in a much simpler frame on the desk. It is apparently an abstract piece composed mainly of three colorful blobs—or, rather, two colorful and one less so. There is also a vivid yellow sun in one corner. The most obvious signature that it bears is a very small handprint.

Today, the artist herself has chosen to darken his door, and since he knows exactly where she's been, he is not expecting to like what she has to report. Kaz sighs. Heavily. He never should have gotten involved with legitimate business. The Crow and Cup takes more paperwork than the two gambling halls combined. That doesn't really have anything to do with the excited girl in front of him, but she is preemptively reminding him of all the other things he has to be annoyed about. "What happened?"

When he takes a proper look at Jordan, however, she is only smiling. She looks content, but not jubilant. He does not like how much this puts him on edge.

When does he stop looking for the cracks in the illusion, for the lie behind the happiness, the truth behind the peace? When does he stop looking at the girl he has fought and bled and broken to give a chance and a childhood to, and doubting that he succeeded?

When I get out of this city.

Kaz pauses, noting the *when.* It's an unexpected catch in the lock, a small and sensitive lever. He files the thought away into one of the corners of his mind unoccupied by schemes or cobwebbed, fragile memories, to be withdrawn when he writes to Inej later. The present requires its own focus.

Jordan slips her hands into her pockets. "Nothing you need to beat him up with your cane for."

Kaz scowls. It is, admittedly, not that different from what his expression was doing before.

"We just talked. I reminded him about my many knives, and then I used them to cut the chain on this, on my way home. D'you think they're real pearls?" Jordan carries on, undaunted, because of all the things he has wanted to teach her, she's chosen to learn not to be afraid of him. Perhaps it's just as well that he has chosen to live apart from the Dregs; despite the massive liability, it provides a physical border between the man he needs to be and the man he wants to be. The man Inej wants him to be, the one Jordan needs him to be. Within the walls of the house that made him, he passes the time with his own ghost and learns anew who he was.

Now, he extends a hand for the necklace that Jordan is holding. Her eyes move briefly from his open palm to his face, and he knows why; his gloves are sitting on the end of the low bookcase, an arm's length away.

Jordan holds his gaze as she drops the necklace into his hand. "Are you gonna wear them when we go to Jesper and Wylan's tonight?"

Kaz's eyebrows shoot up, the string of pearls momentarily forgotten. There's that *when* again. "I wasn't aware that we *were* going."

Jordan looks sheepish. Maybe that's her mother's doing. If it were him, Kaz would have upped the confidence if anything. "We should," she says, sounding almost defensive. She stands up straighter, and her whole frame sets in that determined way that tells him she isn't changing her mind, come hell or high water. To Kaz, those two things are nearly the same. "They've been inviting us forever, which is about how long it's been since we last went. And…" Her mouth twists briefly before she forges on. "With Mama gone, it might be nice to have the company."

Mama. Not Inej. She's steering him to the answer she wants, picking the words that she knows will mean something. The trouble is, it's working. Kaz's eyes move briefly to the framed painting on his desk.

"Am I not civilized enough for your association?" he says drily, unwilling to give in just yet.

Jordan rolls her eyes dramatically. It reminds him forcefully of Nina. “It’s not like she’s any more civilized than you. She’s a pirate and you walk around the house in a suit.”

In lieu of answering, Kaz turns the pearls over in his hands. He knows a good fake on sight; during his early years with the Dregs, when the gang was a loose association of old cadgers and penny-poor urchins struggling by, they did a good deal of counterfeiting. Kaz himself was often assigned to those jobs because of his skill with details, the craft and tedium of it all. But a perfect replica is impossible.

He turns the necklace in his hand, pinching two of the beads together to test their grit. Indeed, there’s some roughness at the point of contact. And neither their color nor their shine is uniform. That was always the trick to making something look real; the small imperfections, the weathering, the faults nature gave it. “Say these are real. What will you do with them?”

Jordan lifts a nonchalant shoulder. “Fence ‘em and buy hot chocolate. Or string them around your neck and drag you to the Geldstraat with me.”

And *that* is his daughter. Kaz is fully aware that she probably knows what she’s doing; she and Inej both are far too aware of their power. He could fight back. This city hasn’t killed that rabid spirit in him yet. But he is of an age now where he finds it best conserved.

Of an age. He wants to shake his head at himself. He’s only a few years past thirty. If he were still living in the country, he would just be starting life on his own—getting married, getting settled. He certainly wouldn’t have a daughter of nearly fifteen. But instead, he is here, and perhaps he can’t settle any more than Inej can, just—in a different way. He still remembers his words to Colm Fahey: *Spend some more time in Ketterdam. You’ll feel ancient.*

“I’m going to save you from what’ll happen if you try that,” says Kaz, snapping the ledger shut. “We’re going.”

Jordan grins at him. “I love how you say that like it was your idea.”

Kaz ignores her, opting instead to stand with aid from his cane and make for the door. There will be plenty of time for her goading on the way to the Geldstraat. A slight smirk touches his lips as he tucks the string of pearls into his pocket.

“Hey!” Jordan protests, scrambling to catch up.

“You can have them back when you tell me what actually happened today.”

He can almost hear her sulking. “Those are mine!”

“As much yours as they are mine,” says Kaz, opening the office door to step out into the hallway. “Unless you slipped into a jeweler’s to pay for them.” It’s the criminal semantic equivalent of *finders keepers,* but not everything has to be complicated.

Inej would laugh, to know that he’s thinking that when he’s about to deliver a letter to her by means of a planted barrel of hardtack. He only wishes he were there to see it.

Jordan is still complaining as they start down the hall. He wonders if she notices that he left his gloves on the desk behind them.

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By the time they reach the Van Eck Manor, Kaz is wondering if they ought to build a second branch of the tunnel from the manor to Thirteen Zelverstraat. At this rate, they'd just as soon have an entire underground maze running beneath the city. While the prospect is tempting—especially as he's facing the pitch of the manor's front steps—it would require too many precautions to protect those passageways meant to be private, enough to outweigh the benefit of the system for smuggling purposes.

Jordan springs up the steps like a goat, but she waits for him at the top as he joins her with rather more effort. He stands slightly behind her, knowing that she'll be trying to steal the string of pearls back from him. Unfortunately for Jordan, he taught her every trick she knows.

Neither one of them has time to reach for the door handle before it's flung open with a level of enthusiasm that makes him expect Jesper, but instead, Wylan is standing in front of them. He has either cut his hair, or his curls have thinned with time, making his face look narrower.

"You look surprised," Kaz observes, drily amused.

"I didn't think you'd actually come," says Wylan. There is a sharpness, almost an accusation, in his eyes, that Kaz was somehow not expecting. He probably should have. Wylan has, after all, grown into his status; he runs as much of Ketterdam from behind the curtain as Kaz does, if in a very different domain.

Kaz has been in this game too long to waste his time on guilt and regrets. He's not sure he could summon some if he wanted to. "I like to break expectations."

Wylan looks like he's a step away from rolling his eyes. Jordan does not show the same restraint. "And to linger on my doorstep, apparently," Wylan says.

Jordan takes the invitation to duck under his arm and into the house. Wylan gives Kaz another look, but it's not like he's about to criticize Jordan's manners.

You shouldn't make friends with crows.

Why not?

They don't have any manners.

When Kaz just holds his stare, Wylan gives a short and cut-off sigh, then steps out of the way into the foyer, saying something to the maid who has been lingering behind him, glaring at Kaz like she always does.

Kaz can't bring himself to be bothered. If only all of his enemies were so mild in their offensives.

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Were Kaz to guess, he'd say that Jesper was told to wait and was not overly pleased about it, judging by the way that the former sharpshooter is hovering in the doorway that leads to the main dining room. He looks poised to move out of the way, as if expecting Kaz to stride past without stopping, but he recovers his balance quickly.

At least he hasn't lost that. It's amazing how quickly his comparatively brief sojourn in Ketterdam's underworld has been forgotten; apparently Jesper plays the markets better than he ever did at the tables, and while he's still dressed in appallingly bright colors, the tailoring is not the mismatch of leather and brocade that the Barrel favors, but instead done along cleaner lines—knotted cravat, silk pocket square. Both sky-blue, because of course they are. Even the bones and hollows of his face aren't so prominent as they were once.

He seems to retain a sort of deference to Kaz—though perhaps it's more the attitude of someone who's come across a wolf, keeping their head down in hopes that it won't attack. Either way, it's Kaz who initiates a handshake, and he marks the way that Jesper's eyebrows go up in response before he takes it.

It's over too fast for the old fear and disgust to settle in, really. He thinks, briefly, of writing to Inej about this, and then discards the idea; he's no child hanging every interesting leaf they find, every smudged-charcoal drawing they produce on the wall. If he's proud of this, he'll keep that much to himself.

He looks over to the table, where Jordan is already lounging in a high-backed chair. The maid who'd doted on her as a child seems rather less fond of her now.

Jordan notices that he and Jesper are both looking at her. "What? I'm hungry."

Jesper looks between them. "Oh, I get it," he says. "That's why you showed up."

"Because I was hungry?" Jordan asks, messing with the end of her braid. Kaz is reminded, for no reason he can pick out, of when she was small and always talking about how she wanted long hair.

"Because you talked him into it," says Jesper, grinning now. He doesn't elaborate, or say he'll proclaim it to the whole city, or make any of the jokes that a younger Jesper might have, but Kaz feels uncomfortably raw, vulnerable, all the same. That's all the invitation that he needs to move away from the doorway with its elegantly molded trimmings and go sit by Jordan, feeling dual relief at getting the weight off of his leg and getting away from that conversation.

Although he hasn't, really, because Jordan is inordinately proud of herself. "I *guess* I did," she says smugly, folding her arms on the table and drumming her fingers against her elbows. Kaz has a flash of understanding why people found him so insufferable. Not that he couldn't or didn't use it to his advantage. Jordan just hasn't learned how, yet.

"Dinner will be out in a minute," says Wylan, emerging from the narrow door that leads to the kitchen. It's like the back door of the Rietveld farmhouse, built in two halves, the

windowed upper half able to swing independently of the one beneath. In the case of the manor, it's meant to allow communication and deliveries to pass from the kitchen. In a farmhouse, it lets in the outdoors by fractions, and it allows a father to call his children back from the fields.

No use for that at the Rietveld house. You can call yourself hoarse, but those boys are never coming home.

Kaz pulls himself away from the thought. It's not the kind of thing that needs to be mixed in here, with the fragile companionship and Jordan and her secrets. His hand finds the string of pearls in his pocket. Part of him wants to forbid her from going back to the university at all. But that will only last until she starts studying there herself, and even then, that's not really the point, is it?

It's the net all over again.

He feels Jordan's hand bump against the back of his and looks to her sharply before realizing that she's trying to take the necklace from his pocket. They both know it's a weak attempt, and he barely has to brush her off.

"You could just tell me," he says quietly, the line of his mouth straight and stern.

"I did tell you," Jordan protests, but they both know she's lying. It sounds too much like *everything will be all right.* Like, *they'll see who wins in the end.*

She is saved from whatever he can think to ask next, however, by the arrival of food—arrangements of glazed-edged, sliced meats on a bed of lettuce, like hills rising from a green plain; creamy white cheeses on shining trays beside halved, vibrant citrus that are outrageously expensive to ship in from the Southern Colonies and Novyi Zem. Crystal pitchers arrive in short order after, filled with water, their sides frosted not by the material, but by the ample helpings of ice—also costly, despite Ketterdam being a miserable, middling cold for most of the year. Jordan's eyes go round as saucers, looking at it all.

"Told you she'd like it," says Jesper, giving an unbearably sappy look to Wylan, who has migrated to stand behind the Zemeni's chair.

They made such a production of this feast to impress Jordan, without even being certain that they'd turn up? Perhaps Jesper is repurposing his love of risk, but more to the point, it reeks of safety, security, the knowledge that whatever they lose, there's always more to fall back on.

Would that be so bad? whispers Jordie's voice in the back of his mind, one he hasn't heard in a long time.

Frankly, he isn't sure that he could do it. In terms of the mechanics, the minutia, it would be absurdly easy to leave all of this behind, to let the empire crumble, to take Jordan and Inej and vanish somewhere, give all the rest to the harbor. But what would his life be with nothing to lose?

He looks at Jordan, loading her plate with lemon and grapefruit and going on about how she'd gotten to try them at a stand in Shriftport. He can't ever really have nothing to lose; as long as he has her and Inej, there's something.

"So how've you been spending your summer, Jordan?" asks Jesper, who has clearly made the rounds at enough parties and meetings to learn the script for small talk. It's still a bit off-putting, coming from him. "Terrorizing everything west of the Beurscanal, I assume."

"Don't limit my territory," Jordan says, sitting up straighter. "Anyway, I've been visiting the university a lot, exploring, you know."

Kaz stares down at his plate, imagining his eyes boring a hole through it like the auric acid through what is probably the ceiling right over their heads.

"How many visits does it take?" Wylan asks curiously from the end of the table. "We just assumed you'd be starting there in the fall."

"Oh, I've got a friend there," says Jordan, all faux calm—an act that she hasn't quite mastered. Kaz adds to his list of lessons for her—acting casual is the best way to look suspicious. In the meantime, however, Jordan twirls her fork in her hand. "I'm hoping that makes it easier to settle in next year, even though I won't be boarding."

Jesper and Wylan look at each other in a way that Kaz feels curiously shut out of. That doesn't matter; he knows what it means. "Who's this friend?" says Jesper.

Kaz shifts his eyes sideways to Jordan, who is determinedly not looking at him. If anything, she is demolishing her grapefruit with renewed fervor. *Go on. Tell them.* They may not know his reasons for mistrusting anyone named Rollins, but they will have their own.

Then again, this is Jesper, who's just as trusting as Jordie ever was, and Wylan, who is a living example of a son shedding his father's legacy. Maybe Jordan is counting on that.

"His name is Alby," says Jordan once she's swallowed the grapefruit. No surname. "And don't say *friend* in that voice. Or at least…" She starts drawing circles on her plate. "Don't yet."

Kaz's head snaps to the side, and he stares at her. *What do you mean, not yet?*

Jesper and Wylan give each other that look again. "What does that mean?" says Jesper, looking far too thrilled about the whole business.

Jordan's drawing increases in speed. "Well…he may have asked me if I wanted to…go somewhere. I mean, hang out. With him." In a very small voice, she adds, "Like a date." She is looking at no one. That doesn't matter.

Kaz holds himself very still. So this is why Jordan dragged him here tonight. *Conflict management.* Caging the wild, rabid thing, not taming it. She knows that he won't, can't, react to this news as he'd like to, not here, in the presence of his associates who wouldn't understand why. He is far from afraid of their judgment, and he owes them no explanation,

but they'd hound him for answers, and probably Inej too, and even Jordan knows enough of the story to tell them more than he wants them to know.

He doesn't know if he can tell that story again.

The world keeps moving around him, and his crows ask their excited questions, cawing over some stone they've found that glitters in the rare streaks of sun. Jordan doesn't look at him, but his eyes are locked at her temple. He isn't sure he's blinking.

She played him. She put all of the pieces into place to force the Bastard of the Barrel's hand, to give him no choice but to stand by as she baited a fate she didn't fully understand.

Kaz pulls the string of pearls from his pocket and wonders at how he ever thought he could leave his gloves at the house. He drops the necklace onto Jordan's plate, pushes himself up from his chair, and strides to the doorway; they call after him, their voices clinging like dead hands to his back.

It's not until he reaches the hall that he stops, facing the glass-paneled doors that open into a garden. Even in the oncoming dark, he sees that it is in full flower, an abandoned easel poised in the middle, waiting for the artist to return, for its singular purpose.

Further down, a melody emits languidly from the music room. Kaz limps down to investigate. Marya is sitting at the piano, picking out a simple tune, a Kerch children's song. One of those skipping games where everyone chases each other at the end.

Jordie always won, virtue of his long legs and seemingly endless energy. Even back then, Kaz always hated losing, but when it was Jordie, he'd never minded getting caught.

Chapter End Notes

apologies again for the week off! there will likely be more of those going forward; I'm going to try to keep them spaced out and not make a habit of them, but I like to have that expectation set up for myself to fall back on when life gets busy. I usually post chapter updates on my Instagram if you want to follow me for news (@fairytales_of_forever)

happy new year! <3

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan makes amends and learns something new.

Chapter Notes

Happy Saturday, everyone! I don't have much to update this week, so let's get right into shout-outs~

Raphale, that's a hard combination to manage for someone who is mentally and emotionally healthy. I really feel bad for Kaz (despite the fact that I've done this to him, lol)

Not another confused platypus!, I could go on forever about the way that Kaz regards his child-self as almost a separate person as a way to protect himself from what happened to him, and how I feel like a necessary part of the healing process is therefore to reconcile with that child and realize that it's just another part of who is now.

EyesJustReading, this is peripheral, really, but the word choice of "when the ball drops" was very fitting for New Year's, lol.

thephonyqueenofengland, while this chapter is in Jordan's POV, I do like to headcanon that Marya at least tried to talk to Kaz, lol. Not to spoil it or anything ;)

andyoudoctor, you are absolutely right that this was hurtful, but it was 100% not malicious because Jordan is lacking so much context (and that's really what frustrates her.)

Aspect_of_Tiamat, congratulations on your epiphany! Hopefully the story makes more sense from here on out, XD.

Also, special shoutouts to Shairanna and mxnii, who have been reading through the fic this week and leaving comments; y'all have given me a much-needed mood boost and some great entertainment. <3

Jordan is starting to think that she miscalculated.

She knew Kaz was going to get mad. After all, he almost hadn't allowed her to visit Alby in the first place, and she saw how he looked away whenever she left for the university district. She saw the way his expression turned to flat lines, like he was disappointed with her. Usually, by the time she got back, Inej would've talked to him, and it wouldn't take long for things to smoothe over. But Inej isn't here now.

Jordan had only meant to have someone else around to keep him from getting too upset with her. Instead, it seems like he's just gotten a different kind of upset, one that's a lot harder for her to fix or understand.

She looks down at the string of pearls, stretched so tight that it's almost shaking between her hands. She knows why Kaz gave them back. *You can have them when you tell me what actually happened today.* Well, she has the necklace, but she doesn't feel like she won. She feels like she screwed up, and it's so *frustrating* that she can't figure out how or why, because of course Kaz would never tell her.

Usually, when this happens, like after he called her Jordie, she would go to Inej and let her mama explain everything. But still, again, Inej isn't here, and a letter will take longer than Jordan is willing to wait.

It won't be the first time she's handled something like this herself, she thinks. In the end, she was the one to talk to Kaz, to make him a deal—a secret for a secret. Could she do it again? She thinks of him disappearing down the shiny hardwood hall of their house, after telling her that Inej was leaving. She thinks of realizing that he didn't want her to go.

That's what he always does. He leaves before anyone else can. Down the hall, out of the dining room, into the alleys and down the canals that only he knows. Unfortunately for Kaz, he's landed himself with some people who will find the secret passages, who will chase him down the stairs, who will stand in front of the door and say that if he wants them to stay, then he has to stay first. Jordan crossed half the country, stowed away on a ship, and dove into Fifth Harbor to come back to him. She is one of those people. And she may have been the one to drive him off, but she'll be the one to follow him wherever he tries to go.

Jesper is standing up, turning a fork over and over in his hand. It's slowly bending into a wavy shape, and Jordan wonders if he knows that he's doing it. His other hand won't stay put—it leaps from his belt to his collar, to his hair, back to drum on the table. "Should I—or—"

"No." Jordan gets to her feet, pushing her chair back. She leaves the necklace on her plate and starts for the door. "I'm going to talk to him."

Wylan is still sitting down, but he puts a hand on her arm to stop her as she goes by. His eyes find hers, brows drawn together. "Jordan. Are you sure that's a good idea? Maybe we should wait—"

Jordan steps away from him, maybe more sharply than she meant to. "No. This is my fault." *And he'll be halfway home if I don't go talk to him now.*

"Well—" Jesper slowly sinks back into his seat, but he's still spinning that fork in his hand, over and over and over. He grimaces slightly. It's a weird look on him—he never seems to

regret anything in a way you can see, just to keep going, ramp it up higher, have enough fun to forget the mistake. “Kaz isn’t exactly the most forgiving. I mean, it’s good that you want to apologize, but…”

“I don’t want to apologize. I want to fix it. There’s a difference.” *Mati en sheva yelu.* Jordan pulls her shoulders back and looks between the two of them—down the long, gleaming table, candles’ reflections always changing on the near-black wood and the silver platters, to their matching, worried expressions. Suddenly she feels awfully impatient. “He’s my *da.* I don’t know what you think he’s going to do!”

She doesn’t stay to listen to their answers. The guilt is starting to settle in, cold and sticky, clinging at her heels, and she is determined to make it go away. She’ll run from it if she has to.

As Jordan crosses the threshold into the foyer, the tapping of her footsteps shifts to sound more hollow. Jesper told her that this hallway used to be tiled in black-and-white, but now the floor is set in skinny planks of birch.

It’s not fair , whines a small voice inside of her. *Why can’t I just have a date and be excited about it like my friends can?* It seems like Raina is forever going on about some boy or other, getting all dressed up while Jordan stands by and brushes her hair and talks down her worries.

But her friends, Raina and all the girls like her, will never know what Ketterdam looks like from high above the streets. They will never see the tangle of dark canals like a spilled mess of yarn, never look across to the yellow moon when the clouds slip out of the way and feel as if it understands them. They will never learn to pick a lock when they can’t sleep or get a knife for a birthday present. Is it worth it?

Jordan stops just short of the doors when she hears music. Miss Marya is in the music room, playing the piano. Other than that, the entryway is empty; moonlight dusts the gold molding at the ceiling’s corners, and outside, the broad street is still, lights winking in the windows of the other houses along the way. Jordan feels a sudden, piercing longing for fireflies—or maybe it’s just a memory. Nothing moves, and it seems as if nothing has in a while.

Jordan goes to the open door of the music room and knocks on the doorframe. The music trickles to a halt, and Miss Marya looks at her. Her hair is streaked with more whitish-gray than red by now.

“He’s in the garden,” she says, and she smiles. There is a look in her eye that’s much more knowing than it has been in a long time.

Jordan releases a quiet sigh. “Thank you,” she says, then turns on her toes and heads for the glass-plated doors to the garden across the hall. In between the panes of glass is rough, green-painted wood, one of the few things in the manor that isn’t neat and new. Jordan, however, is more concerned with what she can see through the glass—namely, the dark shape she knows so well, lingering among the bushes by the dim form of a low stone wall.

Jordan pushes the door open and shuts it silently behind her; she's greeted by the gentle brush of a warm breeze against her face. She can see why this is the most expensive part of Ketterdam to live in. Even the weather seems kinder here.

Kaz doesn't turn around, but that's okay. He knows she's there. Jordan walks up through the neatly shorn grass, silent as a shadow, and stands next to him. Over the lip of the stone wall, she can see the reflection of moonlight in the Geldcanal, shifting endlessly, revealing the dark water in negative and outline.

She'd told Jesper that she didn't mean to apologize, but now she has the overwhelming urge to say she's sorry. She isn't sure what else to say.

What *can* she say without knowing the whole story? She can only work from the pieces that Kaz and Inej have given her—she knows that Alby's dad is one of Kaz's old enemies, one of the Barrel bosses he drove out. She knows that Jordie was his brother, the one she's named after. But she doesn't understand how they're connected, or why it makes him shutter every window, latch every door, lock everything down too securely for even the thieves he's trained to break in. He seems almost afraid. And that makes Jordan really, really scared.

If she can't break in, she'll have to knock. She takes a deep breath and sets her hand on the stone wall. It's rough and cold. "Da?"

He doesn't turn to her. He doesn't move. But he isn't leaving. "Jordan."

There's a coldness, a hardness in his voice that makes her even less sure about what she's going to say. But she has to know. Whether she was born curious or he made her that way, he adopted her. He's her da. He chose her. That has to mean something. Jordan rubs one finger back and forth across the pattern of the mortar. "Did Alby's dad kill Jordie?"

She sees his hands, bare and pale, curl at his sides. "Why ask me that now? So that you can go back and tell them everything, tell them why I left?" She doesn't get the chance to respond before he goes on, harsh and biting, his rasp serrated. "No, don't stop now. Don't quit when it goes sideways. If you're going to make me a player in your scheme, at least go through with it."

A younger Jordan might have cried or given up there. As it is, she's stung. But she also knows her da. She is as stubborn as she is clever, and he taught her to be that way. She can't be surprised by Kaz being the way that he is, but neither can he be surprised by her being the way he made her. Still, she wants to stomp her foot. "I'm not going back inside. You're not going to make me leave. And I *can't* tell them anything, because I only know pieces." She knows there's nothing more childish than claiming that she isn't a child, but she really wants to. She's not a baby anymore, and she's not going to leave, and she doesn't get why Kaz can't understand those things.

She tries to make herself breathe, but the more she thinks about it, the more mad she gets. "Do you just not trust me? Is that why you don't tell me anything, why I can't see my friend but I also can't know why it terrifies you so much?" Because he is afraid. His fear is just different from everyone else's. Someone or something made it so that he learned to bite before he learned to hide.

Kaz almost laughs, but it's all broken and wrong. "When was the last time one of your classmates scaled four stories in the rain with nothing to catch them and no one watching? When was the last time Thea or Om could walk the streets with the knowledge that they'll live to see their next meal? What do you think my trust looks like?"

He doesn't, Jordan notices, deny that he's afraid.

And it's not like Jordan hasn't had those thoughts herself. It's just that it's all complicated and tangled now. She wants to say what she said before— *jump off the wire.* But this is more than that. There's no way Kaz could be scared of *her.* He's her da, and she's just a kid. She feels like she understands less than she ever has. She digs around in her pocket until she finds her watch, the one he gave her, with *J.R.* on the back, and pulls it out, looking at it instead of at him. "No, I mean—do you not trust me to keep secrets? I haven't told anyone the ones you *have* told me." She doesn't like how confused and whiny she sounds all at once, but there's something about her da that—as much as he makes her feel grown-up and capable some days —can make her feel like nothing but a little kid again.

Kaz is silent for a long time. The wind stirs the waters of the Geldcanal, and the gurgling sounds are loud in Jordan's ears.

When he speaks again, his voice is rough and dry. "You still have the watch."

Jordan dares to try again. "It was Jordie's, wasn't it? That's what the J.R. stands for?"

Again, the silence roars in her ears, but when it settles, she hears Kaz's voice again. "Yes."

Jordan lets out a quiet breath. *Rietveld. His new name. His old name.* She wonders why he changed it, but does she dare ask that tonight? She clicks the pocket watch open and runs a hand over its battered face. "I was afraid it would stop working after going in the harbor."

Kaz says something that sounds like, "Not the first time."

Jordan turns her face to him. He is lit from behind by the moon rising over the canal. "What?"

His head twitches slightly. His hair has gone sort of floppy instead of being neatly pushed back, like he was running his hands through it. "You're one of very few people to have tricked me." His voice is fake-calm, but Jordan knows better.

Jordan brushes a hand through the leaves of one of the bushes—some kind of prickly shrub. It's hard to tell in the dark. "Was—was Alby's dad another one?" she asks carefully. She feels like she's holding her breath, waiting for his answer. It's all starting to make sense, and yet her mind is refusing to connect the pieces. She can't really think of her da as invincible, not knowing him like she does, but there's a little girl inside of her who still wants to.

Kaz's stony stare stays fixed on the canal as its current rambles past. But, against the light of the moon, Jordan sees his chin jut in a nod.

Did Alby's dad kill Jordie? He didn't say yes, not exactly. But Jordan knows what that means.

The breath rushes out of her. She imagines it joining the wind, being carried high and away to mingle with the fog around the city. Or, maybe, being carried out over the sea, all the way to a ship where her mama could feel it. "One of the places Alby suggested was the Crow and Cup. If we went there, you could send spies, or guards."

She chances a look at Kaz. She wishes she could see his eyes, see the look in them, but they're in shadow. "It isn't always an attack, Jordan."

She hears what he doesn't say: *Sometimes it's slower than that. Sometimes it's more complex. You don't know what you're getting into.*

Jordan wants to grab his arm. She wants to make him look at her. She doesn't know how to argue anymore. She doesn't know if she can, if she should. The only thing she has left is honesty—maybe he'd be disappointed in her, to know that. "Please?" she says quietly. "I—I'm sorry." She'd claimed she wouldn't say it. But what else is there to say?

At last, at long last, Kaz turns his head and looks at her. "So crows can have manners," he says. And even in the dark, even if it's only a little bit, she can hear him smile.

Letters

Chapter Summary

Excerpts from the letters between Kaz and Inej Rietveld, sent with an excess of security over a period of approximately eight months.

Chapter Notes

so sorry for the week off, everyone! my muse was absolutely dead, but it has returned in full force. so without ados being in any way furthered, shout-outs~

cameliawrites, you hit the nail on the head with this one. Kaz knows that Jordan can hold her own in just about any fight, but he doesn't have that same trust that she can't be tricked, manipulated, or outsmarted. And I think he sees that as a really high bar, because if it happened to him—the mastermind—and the brother that some child-part of him still really looks up to, then it could happen to anyone.

Not another confused platypus!, I do shamelessly enjoy exploring the ways that Jordan is similar to her parents, whether inadvertently or on purpose.

thephonyqueenofengland, honestly, I had Inej leave because Kaz and Jordan needed bonding time just as much as I had her leave because she wasn't happy staying in one place.

manateee, welcome to the family!

Raphale, I like the way you pointed out the dichotomy between the way that aspects of their family dynamic are very normal family things, but they're amplified and made so much more complex by the circumstances and people involved.

Shairanna, I am very excited to write more Jordan and Alby together. They are the cutest.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I *adore* how you always pick up on the tiny, subtle references to canon that I simply can't resist including.

KiwisAndTea, and I really think they needed this, to prove to themselves and Inej and each other that they can work things out and deepen their bond without her playing the go-between.

mxnii, "Sometimes, the worst pain comes from kindness, from tricks, not from a full blown charge. Sometimes - that kindness will lure you in, and trap you and pin you

down and rob you for all you're worth." Imma be honest, I had to go look at the chapter and make sure I didn't write this.

Princess_Zivaleh, apologies for any damage to your heart, although I can assure you that said damage *was* intentional.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Excerpts from the letters between Kaz and Inej Rietveld, sent with an excess of security over a period of approximately eight months.

To the head of the Dregs, tucked into the false bottom of a black-lacquered wooden box:

I trust you'll find other uses for the box once you've retrieved this. If not, I will have ideas to send to you. ~~Any excuse to write to you again~~. I have learned that the Zemeni pride themselves on their woodwork; there are all sorts of creations made from rare trees being sold at the ports. Sold for quite a lot, in fact—I looked over some of the price tags as I was ignoring them. I could just see you standing there, pretending to check the quality, and suddenly there's an entire salad bowl up your sleeve. ~~I wish you *were* here.~~

We're only stopping to resupply, and by the time this letter is sent we'll be gone; I've received news that will have us passing far north of you. You may know of my source. He insists on being convoluted and mysterious, but his tips are never wrong.

To the captain of the Wraith *, care of a certain Fjerdan royal:*

Don't tempt me, or next time I *will* join you. Though, while I'd say, sell anything for whatever it'll get, personally I wouldn't up the price just because it's exotic. It's not a real measure of value. ~~Treasure, did I ever call you valuable, a thing of cost? Forgive me, if there's any forgiveness left in you~~. To the Zemeni, some types of Kerch cod would be called exotic.

And your informant sounds insufferable. I can't imagine how you deal with him.

To the head of the Dregs, sewn into one of the ear flaps of a truly hideous Fjerdan fur hat which is, notably, bright scarlet:

This receptacle was not my choice. It's your fault for leaving your last letter with our half of the Fjerdan crown. She insisted that it was the perfect gift ~~and would do a masterful job of hiding your haircut~~. Perhaps that little crow that's come to nest with you would appreciate it more.

Though she's not so little now, is she? We'll be heading further south soon, where I will surely be asked to tell more stories about her, and as I try to think of the best ones I only think of how much she's grown. If you can think of any good stories, if she falters in learning to fly, send them on to me. ~~I miss her. I miss you.~~

In other news, most of the bounty hunters don't travel this far north, but that means that there's no one looking for burning ships among the ice floes. The fire only warms their crews for so long, and by then their cargo is gone. Some of the girls have asked that I teach them to fight. I see the change in their faces when there is a weapon in their hands, a blade or a bat or a gun. Their smiles are sharp enough to cut. ~~Did I look like that? When you gave me my first knife? When you called me dangerous?~~

My informant is insufferable at times, but ~~when he isn't…~~ such is the cost of working with the best in the business. Though I wonder how he does it. My crew may be down a first-and-a-half mate, but I hear that he is missing his best spy.

To the captain of the Wraith *, care of a constantly traveling caravan, which really does make one wonder how anyone was able to get mail to them:*

If that is Fjerda's idea of a perfect gift, I'd wonder if they're still bitter with us ~~about the Ice Court~~. I'm tempted to burn it. The little crow you spoke of is objecting to that idea, but even she refuses to put it on.

I'm afraid I'm not much of a storyteller ~~(but you know that: who is always coaxing me to go on, finish the story, but you, treasure?)~~. I will say that she's taken perhaps too quickly to her wings. She sets her sights further than she has the strength to reach. They say any path is shorter as the crow flies, but that only encourages her to go farther each time.

Shame about the burning ships. Might damage that icy landscape. Do the crewmen freeze or drown first? ~~They ought to drown. That's the worst way to go~~. One would think there wouldn't be a market for what they're selling in pious Fjerda, but restraint just makes for more wanting. The longer they can't have something, the more they'll want for it. ~~After all, how long did we wait for each other? How long will we go on waiting? Somehow, after years, these months feel so long.~~

The little spiders look the same. The ones that stay are the ones hungry for a fight. They don't entirely replace my best spy (~~who I am missing in many senses of the word)~~ , but they are so ready to prove themselves. Just before I wrote this, one of them returned from their web with news from one of the dockshore bars: watch the Ravkan shores and waters for the *Cutlass,* a beast of a cargo ship named for an oddly sleek weapon. Its hold will be full, but the captain is

not yet satisfied and is looking to track the routes of the Suli caravans. It would certainly be a shame if they could be warned to change their patterns.

To the head of the Dregs, slipped into a sheaf of seemingly unimportant paperwork regarding the upkeep and proceeds of the Van Eck fleet:

My parents wanted me to hide this in a flower garland, but there was no way to keep it from wilting. They accept, even bless my choice of men, though you may not believe it. I will have you know that they approve of the ring, despite all the other jewelry that they're sending me home with. No use in telling them that one can't much display that much gold on a pirate ship *or* in Ketterdam.

Mama all but demanded that the caravan at least hold a small celebration, if belated, for the wedding. Of course, *small* by Suli standards means that the music carried on all night and there was enough food to feed the whole caravan for a week. They wrote your name on my hands, but it's hidden. I only wish it would last until I get back to you so that you can find it. ~~I wish I could watch your face, that careful intent, watch you look at me like you're trying to solve a puzzle.~~

As you may have already guessed, my people are steeped in tradition like tea left to brew too long, but they will change their routes to protect their own. I told them it will only be for this one summer; If I had to guess, it won't be long before news reaches the ports that the *Cutlass* quite mysteriously vanished.

And as for Fjerda—there is a market everywhere. There's a reason they call it the oldest profession in the world. The only fault in that is that, for too many, it is not a profession at all. ~~It's a cage. Much like wanting what you can't have.~~

To the captain of the Wraith *, nailed beneath the lid of a crate of salted meats which was reserved for her by a blackmailed warehouse keeper:*

You know I'm not bothered. I'm not the one of us with a taste for flowers. Though I know it's one of your traditions. And your parents will certainly be more at ease, though perhaps not wiser, for accepting your choices. ~~To dislike your daughter's romantic prospects seems to do more harm than good~~. There's more use in gold, by the way, than to display it to the world. I hear it has a shine that crows are very fond of.

More and more, you give me reasons to take your next voyage with you. Things to steal and puzzles to solve. Of course the world is full of them. Ketterdam is full of them. ~~But right now it's empty of you~~. Besides, if I did go with you, you'd be missing all the fun of hiding and discovering these letters.

I would say it's a shame for the *Cutlass* , but the crewmen really should learn to keep their traps shut. Though I've heard that enough strong Kerch whiskey can loose the most tightly kept secrets.

And I do have a story for you, about that little crow. The spiders are good for many things, it turns out, including watching the Crow and Cup, where they'll be posted in a few days' time, where that little crow will be trying again to fly further than I wonder if she can manage. This time with company. But if she falls, it turns out, as I have learned and ensured, that a spiderweb makes a fine net.

Chapter End Notes

look at that! A Letters chapter with minimal angst! I can, in fact, do it, ladies and gentlemen.

Jordan/Alby

Chapter Summary

Jordan tries something normal. We all know how that tends to go.

Chapter Notes

toovrede, I have had a great time developing Jordan as she grows up <3

mxnii, the kanej simp energy has, if anything, only increased with time XD

Not another confused platypus!, kanej is the superior murder couple, forever and always.

thephonyqueenofengland, their language will always be in the things unsaid, what lies between the lines, no matter how honest they get with each other.

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I love your point about Inej accepting Kaz with his puzzle-solving tendencies, especially as to how he was doing it even before he had to use it to survive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jordan has been fidgeting in front of her mirror for going on half an hour, and even though Kaz is off doing Dregs stuff, she can just *feel* him rolling his eyes from blocks away.

“Shut up,” she mutters to the imaginary Kaz, running some of the oil that Inej sent her over the gleaming weave of her braid, which Kaz did before he left. Her reflection, she is relieved to see, looks equally irritated. It’s good to have backup.

It really shouldn’t be this hard to decide what to wear, she thinks, considering that most of what she owns is black, or a very deep shade of some other color. It’s not like it’s hard to find things that match. But nothing looks good enough anymore, and it is officially driving Jordan nuts.

As she’s rummaging through the bottom of the wardrobe, her hand brushes up against something unexpectedly soft. Jordan curls her fingers around the fabric and pulls it out.

“Oh,” she says with a soft gasp, a sad smile.

The little dress—and how little it seems now—is midnight blue, spangled to look starry. She holds it in both hands and turns it back and forth in the light. She must have been five or six, last time she wore this.

Well, it won't do her any good today, but it's a good thing to have in her memories. It's good to be reminded of everyone she has behind her—everywhere she's been, since she doesn't know where she's going.

Usually, that's exciting to Jordan. It's like when she's standing on the edge of a roof, curling her toes over the lip, teasing gravity to see when it'll get fed up and carry her down. She can go anywhere with the whole city beneath her. The hand of Ghezen, the Church of Barter, holds her up from one side, and on the other, the docks jutting out into the harbor like fingers hold her tight, raise her into the wind like a flag. There's an old Suli story that Inej has told her about finding your wings. Every time, she is tempted to just take that final step, see if she'll fly.

But this is like doing it blind. Jordan is sure of herself—but that's where it ends. What about Alby? What about his feelings? And Kaz, too—she can't push him too far or he'll put an end to the whole thing.

She wonders if Inej would be able to tell her what to do. Then again, she's fairly sure Kaz and Inej have never been on a regular, proper date.

This all feels too normal to her. She knows what to do if things go sideways, but what if it goes *well* ? Is she supposed to give Alby a chaste little kiss at the end of the night like a good girl and then go tell her friends about it, as if she won't be back on the skyline the next day, jewelry shed, gleaming only with blades? Should she even be doing this if he doesn't want all of her—if he doesn't, can't, know about all of her?

Jordan looks back in the mirror and is slightly startled by the set of her expression, the tightness of thought around her eyes. "Scheming face," she says quietly, and makes herself smile. Maybe she can try doing something normal. Maybe that isn't so bad.

<><><>

She's late. Alby wonders if she isn't coming. He means for the thought to be brief, but it gets snagged on something or other in the clutter of his mind and won't seem to budge.

He's sitting at a tucked-away table at the Crow and Cup, a tidy little coffee shop on the Lid. The decor is fairly dark and austere, restrained—the walls are papered in slate-gray with a pattern of black diamonds, the space lit with some kind of industrial fixtures. Outside of the broad glass windows, the citizens and newcomers of Ketterdam mingle on the street, marching smartly about their business, not stopping for greetings or frivolities.

Alby picks at the sleeve of his deep green coat. He'd all but begged his father for the allowance to buy this one new—he'd been dreading the idea of showing up to meet Jordan in a coat with too-short sleeves and mismatched buttons. Not that she'd never seen the old one, but…this is important. He can't exactly explain why, but it is.

It must be a slow time of day for the cafe, he supposes; the young woman who has just emerged from the back storeroom looks bored. Alby might be feeling the same if he weren't practically vibrating with nerves. Logically, he knows that this is just Jordan, that he's talked to her plenty of times before, but this feels different. Even though he's the one who made it different. Maybe he shouldn't have—

The little bell over the door rings, a tinny sound, alerting the few occupants of the place to the opening of the door. And there she is. Jordan's eyes sweep briefly over the space before landing on him, and she gives him a small wave.

Alby waves back, though the motion is belated because…well. Jordan has her hair braided like usual, but she's put some kind of gold ornamentation into it, little medallions lying against each stitch of the plait. A high-collared black coat that gaps around her neck hangs like a cape off of her shoulders, and when she turns her head to spot him, a small gold ring gleams in the side of her nose. Alby didn't know she could wear one. He would very much like for her to keep wearing it.

She comes over to the table and Alby immediately hops up to pull out her chair, then hesitates. For a moment, they look at each other.

Alby laughs nervously. He imagines that the sound must be impossibly loud. "D'you mind if I…?"

"Oh." Jordan blinks. A full smile breaks across her face. How did he never notice that her eyes crinkle at the corners like that when she smiles? "Sure."

In a bit of a rush, Alby pulls the chair out of the way for her, then more carefully pushes it back to the table after she's seated. Once he returns to his own seat, he explains, "I didn't know if you wanted to do it yourself. I mean—I wanted to make sure I was there if you wanted me to." He runs a hand over his face. "I just said 'wanted' *so* many times."

For some reason, Jordan looks delighted at his metaphorically falling on his face. "Do it one more time, for fun," she says, cupping her face in her hands and propping her elbows up on the table. Alby once again finds himself distracted by the nose ring. It isn't his fault that it looks that good on her. "Maybe use it in a sentence?" Jordan adds. "Wanted. I am wanted by the law."

"You probably are," Alby sighs, but he's unable to suppress a grin. Even the stern interior of the coffee shop seems to have brightened.

"I would be if they had anything on me," Jordan says, looking a bit too proud about the fact. Alby genuinely can't tell how serious she's being. She flips her braid proudly over her shoulder, and the light through the window catches on the gold ornaments in it, making them gleam. At least the light is being kind to him today; he imagines Ketterdam's usual mantle of clouds parting, just so that he can see Jordan in all of her glory.

He realizes that the table has been shaking slightly from his bouncing his knee and quickly stops. Of course, when it actually matters, their natural banter is abandoning him and quickly being replaced by nerves. Nothing has changed, he tells himself, but he knows that's not true

—the stakes today are insurmountably higher. And so far, he's doing a terrible job of meeting them.

Luckily, Jordan seems either oblivious to or unbothered by his hesitance. "What d'you think you're gonna get?" she asks eagerly. "They have this amazing spiced tea that they make with some kind of secret syrup or something. And you can get the hot chocolate with cinnamon if you want it."

"Wow. They can get cinnamon imported here?" Alby looks up to the blackboard that the menu is scrawled on. He knows that Ketterdam is a port city on an island nation, a nexus of travel and trade, but spices like cinnamon are expensive, considering how far they have to be shipped in from. A relatively unassuming place like this is usually stingy with them.

"I think they've got contacts in shipping," Jordan says vaguely, also looking at the counter. "Anyway, you should try it. Unlike most Kerch food, it actually tastes like something."

Alby rolls his eyes. "Kerch food has plenty of flavor."

He has the distinct sense that he's gotten in over his head when Jordan narrows her eyes at him, looking positively delighted at the prospect of a debate. "Don't make me drag you to every restaurant on the Lid and prove you wrong. I don't have anywhere to be."

Frankly, the prospect of spending the whole day with her is both thrilling and daunting. "We can always agree to disagree," Alby suggests.

"Clearly you don't know me that well," says Jordan, but she doesn't look offended—rather, there is a certain gleam in her eyes, much like the sun off of those medallions in her hair. "I don't just give up without a fight."

Alby finds that he believes that. This is the same girl who found her way across the country and sea with the help of only his map. This is the same girl who found him in a cluttered, chaotic, ever-changing city and demanded that they try again. This is the same girl who appeared in his room one day, much as she had appeared in his life, and hadn't stopped finding him since. There's no getting away from her. There is no getting away from the pressure she leaves in his chest, the heat, the buoyancy, a whole sun inside of him. And, he considers, he really doesn't want to.

"I know," he says with a crooked smile. "Don't know why I offered."

Jordan is grinning at him, opening her mouth to say something else, when the people at a nearby table shoot to their feet. They were tucked against the wall, seated at a table in a tidy alcove that his eyes slid over earlier, but now they are standing, reaching for their belts. For weapons, Alby realizes.

Jordan is also standing up.

"What are you doing?" he hisses, reaching for her, trying to pull her back.

"Where the hell is Maikel?" Jordan mutters.

Alby blinks. He's never heard her swear or anything close. But she bites into the word in a way he likes. *Focus.* "Who's Maikel? What is going on?"

"They know the rules." It's like Jordan isn't listening to him. She looks briefly up to the ceiling, for reasons Alby can't fathom. And then—she starts *walking towards them.* Towards the armed men. Armed and clearly angry. This all seems very obvious to Alby. This time, he does grab her arm.

"Are you insane?" he whispers.

Jordan tears her arm away, and for a moment she looks so angry with him that Alby recoils. Then she takes a deep breath. In the background, the men have started yelling. "They were trying to broker a deal and it went sour. I've got this. Just trust me."

Alby meets her eyes, searching them for something that'll make him understand. "Jordan—"

She steps closer to the table, leaning over it, and holds the side of his face, turning it to her, like she's putting blinders on him. He certainly feels blinded. "Alby. Do you trust me?"

He thinks again of Jordan, finding him every time, always coming back and believing they can try again. Believing in him, that he'll run headlong into her schemes and never fall short. Asking for the same in return.

He nods.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the week off! The muses abandoned me, but they have returned with a cliffhanger ;)

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan gets into a fight. Alby learns a secret.

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK, BABY!

Okay, so of course S2 of Shadow and Bone is out, and I have a whole lot of thoughts but most of them are spoilery, so feel free to discuss in the comments! I will say, however, that Freddy Carter in particular absolutely knocked it out of the park this season. Some will claim fan service, but I am a fan and I am being *served*.

In more exciting news, I was interviewed on a podcast recently to talk about all things writing and fanfic! The podcast is called Canonically Incorrect, and it can be found wherever pods are cast <3

Now, some long overdue shout-outs~

mxnii, I do love me a dual POV. <3

Book_Junkie007, it's precious to me how these kids even have the ability to be so cute and uncertain with one another.

thephonyqueenofengland, thank you for giving me the inspo to write a proper kanej date. the world needs it.

cameliawrites, that would certainly be a "meet the parents" to remember, lol!

KiwisAndTea, I will definitely be adding that tag to the fic ASAP.

eekabee, indeed, if I could change anything about AO3, I would make it so that one can give multiple kudos on a story. *sigh*

Shairanna, it was very important to me to make Alby lovable and his own person, given who his father is.

ALSO, thank you to cameliawrites, thephonyqueenofengland, Eurydice, jzmn8r, mxnii, Pipperdoo, and Glane for the well wishes <3

Even though it's Dregs-owned, the Crow and Cup is supposed to be neutral territory—a place to meet while looking respectable and saving the formality and bloodloss of an old-school parley. Jordan knows that, practically by definition, the thugs and thieves that are likely to meet here have no respect for the rules; but the rules at play here aren't set by the *stadwatch* or the Council of Tides. These are Dregs rules. And no one in this city crosses the Dregs anymore.

"Hey," she says, stepping towards the two men who are sizing each other up, reaching into their coats. She's not gonna wait to see if they have pistols or maces. Either way, a window's getting broken, not to mention some skulls, if she doesn't get them out of here.

One of them turns to look at her. The pale sunlight through the bay window glances off the flat of a blade as he tucks it back into his long woolen duster—an axe, Jordan is guessing. "Clear off, scrub. This isn't your business."

Jordan is vaguely insulted by the implication that she's a child, but this probably isn't the time to be taking things personally—especially with Alby fretting like a nervous hen behind her. Instead, she says, "That's where you're wrong. This is neutral territory. Take it elsewhere if you're gonna fight."

He leers at her. Jordan resists the urge to grimace. "This territory sure as hell ain't yours. Unless you're about to show me a crow and cup."

Kaz never let her take the Dregs mark—not that Jordan wants to. The Dregs are an excuse for her, a cover—a shield. Her armor. As long as she's known as one of their little spiders, people know that to cross her is to cross Kaz.

They would know the same thing if they knew you were my da, she'd argued when he first explained this to her. They'd been sitting at the kitchen table of the Zelverstraat house, then brand-new to them. *They'd probably be even more scared to mess with me.*

Kaz hadn't looked at her. He never seems to, when the conversations get like that—like if he doesn't look, he doesn't have to acknowledge that there's more than cold logic at play. *They'd have a lot more reasons to try it.*

Maybe, one day, Kaz will decide that she's old enough for him to explain it all—teaching her how to fight just to turn around and make sure she doesn't have to. Calling her a Dreg as her cover, but never letting her take their mark. Wanting no one to see them together, but keeping her on an arm's-length leash.

I'm the best-worst kept secret in Ketterdam, Jordan thinks ruefully. And that leaves her with no explanation to give to these riled-up bruisers. She draws a pair of curved blades; maybe she should just let her knives speak for themselves.

In the background, Alby sputters.

The man who hasn't spoken yet snorts. He's bald, with a neck so thick that there is very little distinction between it and his head, and when he speaks it's with a thick Ravkan accent. "And what are you gonna do?"

“You’re already agreeing on something,” Jordan points out. “Even if it’s that you don’t like me.”

Predictably, it’s like she pushed a button—all hell quite promptly breaks loose.

Somewhere in the course of bending back, dodging the smaller one’s axe, Jordan wishes that Inej were here. Her mama would have had a better shot at negotiating. What she’d really like to do is just get them to hold still, but that’s gonna be hard to do when the knives she chose to draw aren’t the best for throwing. One of these days she should really learn to think ahead.

The Ravkan draws something from his belt that gleams black with oil, and for one heart-stopping moment Jordan thinks it’s a gun, but no—at least the Dregs haven’t gotten *that* lazy. It is, however, a bent pipe, lead if she had to guess, and instead of aiming for her he’s trying to bash the other guy’s head in.

Ridiculous, Jordan thinks, springing up onto the top of the booth and flicking her coat back to sheathe one of the curved knives. *I have to fight them to keep them from fighting each other.* Now that she’s behind the Ravkan meathead, she can see the tattoo on top of his stubbly bald dome. *A wilted rose? Really?*

She hooks her other knife under the pipe that he’s holding and pulls back, throwing off his balance. He falls just fast enough to be clear of the other guy’s axe as it swings at Jordan, and he almost hits his head on the bench. Jordan, meanwhile, leaps back onto one of the tables without so much as a glance over her shoulder; the axe barely misses the hem of her coat, but it does leave a nick in the diamond-checked wallpaper. Kaz is gonna be mad about that one.

Jordan, for her part, is secretly proud of the fact that she hasn’t even knocked over the welded napkin holder. She’s glad it’s a slow time of day, too, otherwise she’d have to deal with people screaming.

“You’re really gonna fight a kid rather than take it outside?” She rises to stand fully on the table, hands on her hips like she’s judging them, but one of her hands rests over a narrow, nasty little blade, ready to hide her draw with a move that’s essentially like palming a coin.

The one in the duster fell under the table, but now he’s up again, sweaty and red-faced, swaying like he’s drunk. It’s like he didn’t even hear her. Jordan would shake her head if she had the time; rage is a coin toss. It can put blinders on you or take them off, but you have to know how to use it.

Now Jordan wants to shake her head at *herself.* She sounds like Kaz.

Another thing you have to know how to use is a long coat in a fight, and the guy with the pipe clearly doesn’t. Jordan confirms this by flinging the small knife at him as he winds up to strike the Ravkan again; by the time he lunges, his coat is pinned to the wall, and he stumbles.

The Ravkan giant seems to finally accept two things: One, that a giant axe isn’t the best for close combat, and two, that he should probably fight the guy who’s actually attacking him rather than going after Jordan. It hasn’t taken him as long as she thought it would. He

promptly puts his opponent in a headlock—not the well-practiced prizefight kind, but the kind learned in prison cells and twisting alleys, the plan B when just drowning you in the canal doesn't work. Probably in spite of what her parents would prefer, Jordan has seen enough fights to know the difference.

She hears Alby sigh from behind her. He sounds relieved, like he thinks that she's going to stay out of it *now.*

Sorry to disappoint.

With a flick of Jordan's other hand, the largest of her throwing knives slams into the wall in the narrow space between the grappling men's heads. There comes a point, she figures, where the wallpaper has to be accepted as collateral damage.

She distinctly hears Alby groan. Should she be happy that he isn't more shocked, more afraid? It's not like she's exactly been hiding what she can do, but…

"Okay," says Jordan, her voice authoritative, now that she's got the fighters looking at her. She slips down from the table and starts walking towards them. "You're going to tell me what this is about."

The one with the duster struggles free. "Business," he says shortly, massaging his neck.

Jordan scoffs. "Like minding your own? Try again."

He leers at her with a mouth full of crooked teeth. "Or what?"

"Or next time, I won't miss." She has one more throwing knife sheathed at the small of her back. She draws it now, turning it over and over in her hand, tilting her head to the side, smiling. "Next time, I'll pin you to that wall by your ears. Half in one and half in the other. You'll be stuck together until you starve or someone cuts you out. You've already cut up Brekker's wallpaper. Think of what he'd do if you got blood on it, too."

At least they look taken aback. That counts for something. But then the Ravkan's eyes narrow, and Jordan has the sense that something is very wrong.

He looks her over. His eyes linger on the shaved sides of her braid; on the sweeping hem of her black coat; on the knife in her hand; and then right back up to her face, gleaming like the barrel of a gun. "His blood," he says with a slow jerk of his chin at his opponent, "or *yours?* "

He thinks she's just another Dreg, Jordan tells herself. A girl rescued from the seedy, broken-down remains of West Stave, maybe. She wouldn't be the first one to never take the Crow and Cup. It's not like she hasn't noticed that Inej doesn't have one—or a scar where one should be.

She hears Alby's chair creak as he, presumably, stands up behind her. It's nice that he's trying. But if anyone in this room had to figure out who she is, Jordan wishes it would've been him.

Either way, she knows better than to self-incriminate. “I doubt it matters, but trust me, you don’t want to find—”

She ducks away, but too late; the Ravkan lunges at her, catching her by the arm, and jerks her against his broad chest, shoving her chin up with the blunt top of his axe. Jordan feels her throat bob against it as she swallows. His other hand is encircling her wrist, making her knife hand useless. And with her free arm pinned, she can’t use any of the others.

Something clatters to the floor. “Hey!”

Jordan twists her head, dreading what she’s going to see. Alby is fully on his feet, having stood up with apparently enough force to knock his chair over. “Let her go!”

“I heard the Kaelish were feisty,” the Ravkan says. “Didn’t know they were stupid.”

That’s motivation enough—as if she needed any—for Jordan to pull her hand free, slashing the knife along his forearm, and reach up and back to wrap her chain of hair ornaments around his log of a neck. She can see veins straining against the Ravkan’s jaw as he fights to shove her off.

Jordan follows the momentum and flips over his shoulder, around to his back; he swats at her like she’s a fly, but he’s broad enough that Jordan can hold on, pulling the chain tighter, the metal digging into her palm. The sounds of his choking get quieter. Jordan steps away in time for him to fall.

She looks back, expecting the other guy to be there, his coat still pinned to the wall, but instead he’s on the ground too. Thea is kneeling over him, some kind of a cloth pressed over his nose and mouth.

Jordan gives her a deeply irritated look, trying to catch her breath. “Could’ve used your help a few minutes ago.”

Thea rolls her eyes. She is very solidly twelve and has developed a penchant for that sort of thing. She pockets the rag and gets to her feet, shoving the man under the booth table with her foot. “I was *trying* not to blow my cover.”

“And what’s Maikel’s excuse, huh?” Jordan retorts, her hands going to her hips, but then she sighs. She may still be a teenager, and a young one at that, but she is choosing to be the bigger person here. Too bad Inej isn’t around to be proud. “Wasn’t the whole point of you being here to—well, to protect me?” She glances back quickly at Alby, who looks as if someone has just shone a very bright light in his eyes.

“To *watch* you,” says Thea, crossing her arms. She grew up on the Ketterdam streets and only seems Kaelish when she’s mad, like now—even her wiry auburn hair seems more stubborn than usual. “Really to watch *him* .” She points a rather accusatory finger at Alby. “And how’m I supposed to know where Maikel is? Probably got sloshed and slept in. Or someone got the drop on him.” She looks disturbingly fascinated by this possibility.

“You’d think the one thing a bruiser *can* do is fight,” Jordan mutters, looking down at the Ravkan where he lays on the faux-wood floor.

Alby wanders into her line of sight, looking dazed. “Is he…dead?”

Jordan kicks him. He groans. She looks back at Alby with a shrug. “Nah.”

"Should he be?" says Thea, walking up to stand next to him. She gives Jordan a wary look. "It sounded like he might've..."

His blood, or yours?

Jordan runs a hand along the pattern of her braid. "Well...*I'm* not going to kill him. And I don't want you to. But...we should probably make him a target. Make sure the others know what he looks like."

Thea nods contemplatively, but there's still a furrow between her brows.

Jordan looks back at Alby. He blinks, but his eyes are still glassy. “Are you…okay.” What started as a question ends up sounding more self-soothing than anything. He presses his hands to his eyes for a second, and Jordan sees him force his shoulders down before he removes them. “Were you just not gonna tell me you’re in a gang?” His voice is rising. “Or that we were being watched? I mean, you—you *knew?* Did you just agree so that you could —” He gestures to fill the empty space.

This is the one thing she *didn’t* think about before jumping into a fight. Jordan looks from the chain of medallions in her hand to Thea, as if either of them are going to help her.

What would her parents do? Kaz would probably lie and not waste his time feeling bad about it. Inej would take care of the immediate problem and then give him pieces of the truth, so he feels like he’s getting it all. But maybe Jordan doesn’t always have to do things the way they would. She’s proud of what they made her, but she is more than that, too.

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath. “Thea, can you get them out of here? Dump ‘em in back, but keep an eye on them. Unless you need—”

“I got it,” Thea says emphatically, sounding almost offended. She does have impressively muscular arms for a girl of not yet thirteen, and a spider at that.

“Right. Okay.” Jordan turns back to Alby. To his credit, he hasn’t just turned and left yet. But he looks so lost—standing there in front of the overturned chair, his green coat the only colorful thing against the austere decor and pale slats of misty Ketterdam sunlight.

Well, he helped her find her way, once. Maybe it’s time to return the favor.

“I—I did know that we were being watched. My da is…” *Paranoid? Rightfully careful? The most dangerous man in Ketterdam, maybe all of Kerch, and still afraid that a kid like Alby could steal one of his closest secrets? Still afraid of a lot of things?* “Protective.”

“Sending spies to watch us on a—” Alby blushes furiously. “On a date? That’s more than just protective. And who even has the power to do that?”

Jordan swallows. The crow and cup sign is mounted on the wall behind her, but they both know it’s there. “It wasn’t about getting information, I swear. He just—he wanted to make sure nothing would happen to me. That’s why I learned how to fight.”

It’s not helping. Alby backs up a step and almost hits the table, looking like she hit him. “You thought I would try to hurt you?”

“No!” Jordan rushes forward, reaching out, but she stops when Alby stumbles back, staring wide-eyed at her. In the periphery of her vision, the chain of medallions catches the sun.

He looks afraid. He’s afraid of *her*.

Alby braces a hand on the table, looking away, his profile rimmed in soft, weak light. “Is this about my dad?”

“Not to me it isn’t.” Jordan takes a careful step forward, silent as a ghost, then another. “Powerful people have their feuds, Alby. They have all these old grudges. And to stay on top of the pile, you have to stay at least a little bit scared.”

He laughs, a little hysterically. “Then I should be the King of Ravka.”

They’re so close now. Jordan sets the ornaments down on the table behind Alby, her arm going briefly around him as she does. He holds her gaze.

“Some adults are smarter than that. I happen to know one of them. And you know what he taught me?” On impulse, Jordan grabs Alby’s hand in both of hers, holding it tight. “We are not our fathers.”

He blinks slowly. He has really long eyelashes, Jordan notices, which isn’t really the kind of observation she should be making in a moment like this. “Your dad…owns this place, doesn’t he?”

And half the city. Jordan nods, cautious.

“Is that why…the flyer…” Alby’s gaze drifts away, to some point she can’t follow. Jordan lifts one of her hands and turns his face to her, like she did before jumping into the fight.

“Promise me you won’t tell him. That you won’t tell anybody.” She hates how it sounds like she’s begging. But she’s going to be enough trouble with Kaz is he finds out that Alby knows…

“I—I won’t.”

“Swear it.”

“I swear.” Alby is as serious as she’s ever seen him. “I might be scatterbrained and just a little bit paranoid, and a whole lot of other things, but Jordan, I’ll keep to any deal you make with

me."

"Just me?" she asks, lowering her lashes teasingly. It's just so fun to see his face get all pink like that.

Alby gives a long-suffering sigh, glancing out the bay windows. It's still afternoon, but the dusk sweeps down without warning in this city. "I guess it would be a bad idea for me to walk you home?"

Jordan laughs and pockets her hair medallions. "After all that, I hope you don't still think you need to." She looks back at him. "I'll walk *you* home, though."

Alby shoves his hands into his pockets with a shy grin. "I've never felt safer."

Jordan offers him her arm and opens the door like a proper lady, leading the way out onto the street. It's so much quicker to get to the University district over the roofs, but that will be a lesson for another day.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz visits an old acquaintance and returns home to a welcome surprise.

Chapter Notes

By the way, I addressed this in the author's note on Ch1, but for most of us it's been a looooong time since then, so—the wiki (and certain other new sources...) have Alby as being about seven in Crooked Kingdom. I don't know if that's in the canon or not, but I have obviously elected to ignore it, so for reference:

Alby is about a year and a half older than Jordan. So in Crooked Kingdom, he'd be 2-3, and Jordan was 1. When this story starts, Jordan is (as estimated by Inej) either an older two or a younger three, and Alby is 4ish. At the point we've reached now, Jordan is a few months shy of fifteen, and Alby is 16. That was more math than I ever wanted to do, lol.

Now that that's out of the way, time for some shout-outs~

PrincessKittyKat52, Movie Sins would have a field day with this fic.

Not another confused platypus!, Alby really is a trooper. He doesn't get enough credit for putting up with all the shenanigans, lol.

toovrede, I'm so excited you listened to the podcast! Also, if I'd really been playing that drinking game in the comments, I think I would've ended up with alcohol poisoning.

cameliawrites, one of my favorite parts of the later stages of this fic has been developing Jordan and Alby—both their relationship and who they are as characters. By the way, I read *collision course* and it was gorgeous, as your stories always are.

jzmn8r, poor Alby had no idea what he was getting into, but it's too late to back out now XD

EyesJustReading, I still find it mind-boggling when people mention re-reading this. Just the fact that anyone likes the silly thing I made enough to read it more than once is delightful and yet completely wild to me.

thephonyqueenofengland, *adds kanej date to story outline*

Book_Junkie007, I was feeling like we'd gotten away from the meaning of the title, so it was about time to drop it into the text, lol.

AlbionAndBeyond, I have developed a new appreciation for the name Kazzle Dazzle thanks to those cast interviews.

Downwiththeship7148, I melted a little when I read this. It's incredibly kind, and I hope you stick around for the rest!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A particularly astute observer with a great deal of free time might notice that Ketterdam's violent crime rate fluctuates in correspondence with the emptiness of berth twenty-two at Fifth Harbor. This hypothetical observer could invent a thousand theories, but there is no one alive with the schedule, skill set, and suspension of disbelief to come to the true conclusion—which is, approximately, that Kaz Brekker misses his wife.

He probably wouldn't believe it himself, and wouldn't say the words at gunpoint. It's far more straightforward to maintain that he is vicious when he has to be, circumstances notwithstanding, though Kaz is too observant to really believe that. He mostly just notices his shortage of non-bloodied shirts and the amount of time that Jordan spends out of the house, which…

Guilt is a parasite that Kaz banished a long time ago. He's rich enough now that he asks for neither forgiveness nor permission when he can just buy both. Still, it reminds him of the way Inej used to go quiet when she'd finally had enough of his mocking her Saints—half the time it was how he always knew where she was, like he could feel the quiet sinking its hooks into him.

He sweeps a page in his ledger aside. Maps and scrawled notes take up most of the back of the book, peppered with shorthand. His memory is still good enough that he doesn't need them, but it's good to have records—doctored, of course—in case one of the Councilmen somehow manages to get a Barrel crusade past Wylan.

The Liddies have been moving in on Dregs territory to the north, chasing urchins and panhandlers off of streets they don't own. Of course, when you're starving under a bridge, your body soaking up the cold from the stone like a sponge, one street looks the same as another—Kaz would know. But the difference is that the Liddies think themselves a high-class breed of rat, better than the brawlers and gamblers who inhabit the deepest part of the Barrel, so they like their streets clean. Funny how they go scurrying like everyone else when the *stadwatch* decide to tidy things up. The Dregs, on the other hand, will offer a job to anyone with enough potential and discretion.

It's going to come to a proper gang war soon. Kaz doesn't like the idea of wasting money and men on it, but there's always the temptation of owning almost as much of the city on paper as he does behind the scenes. His lieutenants have been instructed to not start trouble but finish it, and so far they're keeping things quiet. And, Kaz is pleased to note, profits remain unaffected.

He looks up to the window over his desk. These days, he's more or less fully moved out of the Slat; it has meant tripling the security on the Zelverstraat house and concealing every return and route to it, but the ghost of Kaz Rietveld, dogging his steps, seems unable to give up on the dream of the place. And perhaps that's part of the emptiness that he senses, around corners and in the rafters, above his head and at his side. For the boy he is no longer—the man he is when his name is next to Inej's—this place was meant to be the home he'd lost, to hold a family that wouldn't leave him.

He is much more practical now. He knows death like an equal, neither friend nor foe; he is its messenger and it is his weapon. It has stolen allies from his side and cleared enemies from his path. But every time he looks up to the distant, bottle-green line of the harbor and sees it unmarred, empty of a trim, quick little fleet, he wonders if it's possible for death to betray him when they are partners in nothing.

Kaz realizes that he's been turning his ring back and forth on his finger, over and over with each push of his thumb. His hands remain soft, scarred but not calloused; he is a better legend with gloves on, though a better husband and father without them. He's been staring at the same page for ten minutes.

Inej was supposed to be back two days ago.

Does Kaz dare to admit why he's really sitting here? Eyeing the window, waiting to feel the air in the room shift, waiting to hear her say his name? Or does he not want to be at the Slat when one of the runners comes in, one of the weedy kids who'd be face-down in a canal if not for him, brandishing a paper that says a fleet of ships sank on the way into Fifth Harbor—*Sankt Petyr* , her second ship and her first knife, and the rest of her Saints. Does he not trust his eyes to remain dead, his manner impassive, when he crosses out that *two days ago* in his head and changes it to *never* ?

He could argue that there's nothing else to do, besides protect what he has and take what he doesn't. Speaking of protecting what he has, he wonders again if he should've let Jordan accompany Thea and Simon on another stakeout, barely a week after she came back from the Crow and Cup with a fresh set of bruises and a distinct lack of a poker face.

She'd tried to shut the door silently, maybe hoping that he wasn't home, but he has spent too many years with Inej to not notice the whispering of the floorboards as she moved over them. He almost hadn't asked questions when he saw the bruises, besides *who was it.* He almost hadn't gotten that far, almost went and dug a plot on Black Veil big enough for a grown-up Alby Rollins.

But Jordan had looked at him like she was expecting it. She hasn't quite learned to hide her feelings, but then again, she hasn't had to. He never wanted her to. Except, perhaps, moments like that, when she looks so…resigned. She and Inej know what he is. He never thought he'd be bothered by it.

The first thing she'd said was, "Alby didn't do it. He didn't do anything."

It was like she was disappointed. But why would Alby Rollins know how to fight? As much as Kaz hated to think of it, and still hates it now, it's not a stretch to imagine that Rollins

wants the same safety, the same normalcy, for his child that Kaz wants for Jordan. He'd been all but drunk on victory at seventeen when Rollins fled the city, thinking that only the worst kind of fool would give up that kind of empire for his kid—for anyone.

But now? Now, when the city is his, and Jordan stands in the doorway of his house, *their family's* house, and looks at him like a sailor clinging to the mast as the waves tower, he thinks he'd crush that crooked crown under his uneven steps so that she never had to learn how cruel the world could be.

"Fine," he'd said, both hands on his cane. He could never seem to let go of the comfort that he found in it, as more than a support, more than a weapon. "Then what *did* happen?"

This city's price is blood. I will pay with anyone's but yours.

And Jordan told him. She told him that neutral territory was broken. She told him that Thea dumped the men in the alley behind the Crow and Cup with the refuse and was supposed to have checked them for gang marks. She told him that one of them was now a Dregs target, Ravkan with a tattoo of a rose.

There was something she didn't tell him. And Kaz still doesn't know what it was.

Jordan has a set of tells like everyone else. And when she lies, rather than looking pleased or sheepish like most do, her eyes harden, her blinking slows. She holds herself with more stillness than she otherwise would.

It was on one of these days, staring out the window at Fourth Harbor—since that's all he can see from the Zelver district besides paperwork that he doesn't need—that Kaz realized: she's mimicking *him.*

Kaz slams the ledger shut, giving up on it for the time being, then tugs his gloves on and reaches for his cane. He needs to get more specifics about the fight at the Crow and Cup from Thea, except that she and Simon are meant to be tailing the rose-tattooed Ravkan with Jordan as backup. If Inej were here, he'd already know the man's name, working history, and favorite breakfast food. But she *isn't* , and isn't that just the problem?

He needs a mug of cheap, bitter coffee. He needs a decent fight. He needs his wife to come back.

This would be the right moment, Wraith , he thinks. Sometimes it's like she can read his thoughts. *If you're hiding, you can come out now.*

But he knows she isn't. He'd have known from the moment she came into the room—from the second she stepped onto the docks.

With more effort than it used to take, Kaz rises from his chair and makes for the door, the fall of his cane heavy with every step. *We never stop fighting.* He doesn't know how to fight the ocean. But if it takes Inej from him, he'll learn.

<><><>

Kaz finds himself at De Vos's cart. It isn't the first to have held this spot by the bridge. The original hot chocolate vendor, a player in the Hertzoon scheme, was one of the earliest victims of his vengeance. He was one of the names Kaz threw at Inej in the bathroom of the Geldrenner, trying to make her understand that she couldn't coax any good from him, that he wasn't some pitiful child who'd been hurt and needed comforting. He still believes some part of that—that the plague, that night in the harbor, even Pekka Rollins didn't create Dirtyhands. There was always a monster in him.

Inej hasn't contested that, he supposes. All she's ever said is that the monster wasn't alone, that there was something more. That there was a boy, too, still waiting for a family that wasn't coming back.

He glances down into the canal, as if he might see Jordie's face in his reflection. But he doesn't see much of anything; the water is dark and full of debris. It slides past, and Kaz exhales and keeps moving across the bridge.

"Where's that stray of yours today?" asks De Vos. His face is so lined, the folds pronounced by the shadow of his striped awning, that he looks like a drawing, like something one of the portrait artists on East Stave might do. They offer to draw Kaz every once in a while, but if he wants to look at his own face he's got plenty of mirrors and wanted posters to choose from.

Kaz would love to know how De Vos remembers. He and Jordan have visited the cart, separately or together, a handful of times since he introduced her to it, but it's been months if not more than a year since the last time. "You're still alive," he says, raising an eyebrow in the closest thing he gives to an indication of being impressed.

"I could say the same thing to you, *ja?* " says De Vos, smirking at Kaz, resting his forearms on the top of his cart, which works as a counter. "I stay in the shadows when death comes calling. You gamble with him."

Kaz, who is married to the Reaper of Ships and keeps in on-and-off correspondence with the Corpsewitch, is not so certain that death is a man. He declines to mention the point. "As long as you don't poison me, we should both be all right."

"You will never know it if I do." De Vos's eyes twinkle as he flips the switch above a weathered metal spout and steaming hot chocolate flows into the cup he's holding. "So, what'll it be? Will you spare a few *kruge* and a scrap of decency from that lightweight wallet of yours?"

Kaz, whose watch chain probably cost as much as De Vos's entire cart, finds himself surprised as always that he lets anyone besides Inej rib him like this. But then again, despite the fact that wielding senseless, unnecessary power is sometimes the only thing that makes him feel sane, he doesn't really have a reason to terrorize De Vos—besides stealing his wares. And, contrary to popular belief, Kaz does nothing without a reason.

"Not today, De Vos," he says. "Being a rich man is hardly a permanent occupation." However, as he accepts the cup, he palms double the price into De Vos's hand. "Besides, I have a reputation."

“A reputation that says you have better things to do than shortchange poor, struggling vendors,” says De Vos, very openly pocketing the *kruge* . He almost winks. “Shame on you.”

“I take that as a blessing, De Vos,” says Kaz, sipping his hot chocolate. At least his gloves protect his hands from the heat through the thin paper cup. “Shame pays excellently. It keeps the Barrel full and the pigeons coming back for more.”

“Choke on your cocoa, Brekker.” De Vos doesn’t have any knack for sounding insulted.

“That would disappoint a lot of people who’d rather kill me themselves.” Kaz turns away and heads back toward the bridge, crossing the narrow canal. It’ll be a long walk back to the Zelver district, but maybe he can intercept the little spiders on their return to the Slat…

He’s only a few streets over when he notices it.

The usual city noises remain—people yelling and chattering, musicians panhandling along the streets, audiences whistling and clapping for acrobats and illusionists, stray dogs whining—but among them, most pervasive of all, there is a new kind of quiet. It seeps into the air and weighs on it, echoing and impossible to ignore. It’s the kind of silence that used to drive him half-mad.

Now, Kaz sets his course for home with the smallest shadow of a smile.

He’s able to bear it all the way back through the city, even after hopping a *gondel* and paying off the gondolier to change his route. By the time Kaz makes it up the steps of Thirteen Zelverstraat, the silence is wearing, and the pain his leg has grown noticeably worse. Not eager to face the stairs up to the office and bedrooms, or to wait any longer, Kaz stops in the main room and turns around.

She’s smiling.

Inej is wearing the hat he and Jordan got her, and the pearl earring, and a slender gold ring through one of her brows that must be from her mother. Her hair is a bit shorter, he thinks. Her skin is glowing with sun. Kaz catalogues all of these things—methodically, slowly. He slips his gloves off, sets them on the end table beside him.

You’re home.

He doesn’t know how to say it, he thinks. He holds his hand out to her, like he’s done so many times before, only now—after the years of fear, the years of frustration, of fighting—he isn’t afraid of it. They never stopped fighting. They haven’t, still.

Inej’s hand slides into his slowly, and he feels as if he’s being swallowed in the depth of her eyes, falling into her unwavering gaze. Her rough, calloused fingers slide over his palm and wrap around it, holding him with all the strength she must use to cling to the ropes when the wind rises. She takes a step forward, drawing their hands to the flat of her chest, the base of her throat. It used to be that Kaz couldn’t stand the touch of skin; some days it’s still too much. But now, at the feeling of his skin pressed to hers, this single, simple touch, something connects.

He takes a step of his own, holds his free hand over her waist, hovering there. Inej gives him the kind of smile he's desperate to earn again, the kind he never feels he deserves. "I missed you," she whispers.

The sound of her voice uncoils some impossible knot inside of him that he hadn't even known was there. Kaz settles his hand on her waist, then slowly, achingly slowly, moves his arm around her back, drawing her closer until she's flush against him, and then—

Inej throws her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. She's holding him with the kind of strength that he asked her to, that day in the warehouse, when to do this so easily seemed like a distant dream. And here, now, it doesn't seem such a shameful thing to admit it —Kaz melts into her. He tucks his head beside hers, eyes shut, his face almost pressed to her shoulder, to the thick plait of her hair. His hands curl against her back as the scent of her reaches him. Sea salt and jasmine.

They're clinging to each other like driftwood in a storm, the only survivors. With the way they're leaning into each other, either of them alone would fall, but now they hold one another up, steady and unbreaking. And against her skin, he whispers, "You're home."

Chapter End Notes

If I ever insinuated that De Vos was the same hot cocoa guy from Kaz's backstory because I forgot about that one part in the books....mmmmno I didn't XD

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan asks her da for advice. She's heard this is a thing that normal people do.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the week off, everyone! I've found that taking the occasional break is better for my writing quality and mental health, but if it's ever going to be more than one week I'll let you know :) Now, some overdue shout-outs~

Shairanna, I'm glad you liked that opening line! I work really hard to get them right.

Andhehe, you know I couldn't keep them apart for too long <3

thephonyqueenofengland, somehow, with Kanej, a hug is more satisfying than anything else.

mxnii, this comment is all of my favorite things—quotes and incoherent screaming.

Not another confused platypus!, dangerous death women—what's better than that?

jzmn8r, I think it's a very unique cultural experience to be able to fully understand this comment.

janejanajuno, I love this comment for reasons I can't quite articulate.

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, thank you so much!! <3

hardly_a_ghost, the biggest plot twist in this story is Kaz turning out to be a family man.

MV26, I think my greatest triumph in this story is the universal love that Jordan recieves.

Pipperdoo, kanej is always good for the heart <3

StevenUniverse, Kaz is a very complex, hardened, and often cruel individual, and he's certainly not hiding a heart of gold under there, but still...he misses his wife!

copperyyarrow, you get all the awards for your diligence in commenting on this fic, and eventually I hope to respond to all of them.

greenleaf777, more is here!

simpforjamespotter, I share your pride for these characters, honestly. They have come so far, and I feel like I'm just sort of watching and recording it all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer makes its way out of Ketterdam the same as everyone else—slowly, dragging its feet, hoping that luck will finally be kind where it has never been before. The season is lucky to be making it out at all, Jordan thinks; some people never leave.

But behind it, in the fog and the sudden chill that has closed in over the canals, it leaves a lot of questions. And the colder it gets, the less Jordan is able to ignore them.

Right now, she's fifteen—the age Alby started at the University, the age that most students do. If Jordan wants to go too, she'd normally be starting in the fall. But…she isn't sure if she does. Alby thinks she should go, of course; he goes on about how smart she is, and it's really a little much, even if Jordan knows that he means well. Inej tells her to listen to her instincts. And Kaz—well, he hasn't said a word about it.

Jordan can't stand it when he does that. It's not like he doesn't *know* ; he knows everything, it seems like. He's just waiting for her to make the first move, to show her cards, like they're playing a game at the Crow Club. And, well…he was banned from every gambling hall in the city before Jordan was so much as thought of. Plus, she's never been much of a player herself.

If she doesn't like the game, she makes up her own. Rules, to Jordan, have always been one of many potential routes to success; if following them doesn't work out, she's got options.

Right now, Jordan is waiting in one of the private rooms at the Silver Six, one eye pressed to the keyhole to see what's happening out on the main floor—and where Kaz is. The place is well-constructed enough that the rafters are a lot harder to hide in than those at the Slat, and though Jordan could still manage it, she can see just fine from here. Besides, no one else might notice the door to this room being slightly ajar, but Kaz will. He'll know she's here.

Jordan knows she could wait until he comes home—a new privilege; when Inej was off on her ship, he moved the rest of the way into the Zelverstraat house, and now he's there often enough for one to actually believe that he lives there. Anyway, she could wait and have this conversation in his office, with Inej probably around to offer proverbs, but for reasons she's been putting off thinking about, Jordan wants to talk to her da about this.

Maybe it's because Inej knows what she wants to do with her life, what her purpose is, and has seemingly always known. From what Jordan can tell, it's so straightforward for her—she's happy when she's out hunting slavers, and unhappy when she isn't. And it's not that Kaz doesn't know, or isn't doing what Jordan assumes he wants to, but…since Inej came back, he spends more and more time in his office instead of out getting into fights or overseeing the gambling halls. Jordan hears him talk about business—there's a good bit that he's willing to say in front of her these days, a silent agreement to extend the trust she asks him for—and there are always more people doing the things he used to do, lieutenants and

young recruits, veteran Dregs and experimental initiates. He comes home and reads novels in the evenings, and turns off the lamp in the hallway outside of Jordan's room. She has enough memories from when she was younger to know that there was a very recent time when he was not that sort of man, when the idea of Kaz doing those things would have been a joke, a losing bet. He seems so certain of his choices, still, but Jordan wonders.

She doesn't have to look through the keyhole to know how chaotic it is out on the floor. It's not as bad as the Crow Club, but the air in here is almost heavy with desperation, and even when someone wins, the cheering that bursts up like bugs from a footstep feels like the breath you take before plunging underwater—like they're praying it'll be enough before they spin again, or lay down another card. Jordan doesn't understand why anyone would spend their time in a place like this. The glittering jewels that line the walls like geodes in a cave have drawn them in, a hypnotist's glass like the ones street performers use, and no one seems to notice that the stones are all fake.

She sees the crowd part before she actually sees Kaz. A ripple moves through them—the people seated at the tables or standing around Makker's Wheel, the bouncers standing like soldiers along the walls, even the bartenders sliding glasses down the gleaming counter. The players sit up straight, trying to make it obvious that they're not cheating, or pull their piles of meager winnings a bit closer; the dealers slow their movements, almost exaggerating so that no one can doubt they're not skimming. And then, through an empty space that seems to unfurl in front of him, Kaz emerges. At least he hasn't lost his dramatic flair, Jordan thinks, rolling her eyes. He can say that his reputation protects her and Inej all that he wants—Jordan really doubts that all this is necessary.

Kaz ignores the tables completely and strides past the bar, his gait uneven but not faltering, and only stops to talk to one of the bouncers—new enough that Jordan doesn't know him. Well, they're not really talking; Kaz stands a few feet away, pretending to watch the people at the bar, and flashes a few quick hand signals to the bouncer, who shoots back a reasonably subtle affirmative. Jordan doesn't catch all of it, but the understanding she catches is that everyone's playing honest—at least, as long as Kaz is here. Most people know better than to think they can pull one over on him.

His gaze shifts slightly, and his eyes lock unerringly on Jordan's through the keyhole. She isn't really surprised; it isn't like she's been trying not to be found. She wonders if he'll make some signal to the Dregs on shift or fake a reason to go into the apparently empty private parlor, but instead he heads straight for the door. Jordan scrambles back from it to sit at the table. She should've known better—Kaz Brekker doesn't have to explain himself to anybody.

There are two clicks in rapid succession as Kaz opens the door—one from the latch, one from his cane hitting the floor. He shuts it behind him, regarding Jordan with a sort of muted suspicion. "I hope you're here to tell me you finally tracked down that Ravkan."

Jordan and the other apprentice spiders have been scouring the city for the rose-tattooed man since she fought him at the Crow and Cup. She'd told her da after it happened that the Ravkan knew who she was—or rather, whose daughter she was—but two people had discovered her identity that day, and Kaz only knows about one of them. Jordan is well aware

that there will be a price to pay if he *does* find out, but for Alby's sake, she has to take the risk.

…Maybe she *does* understand why people gamble here.

"I thought you cut the hope out of your heart years ago," she says dramatically, falling backwards on the upholstered bench like an actor dying in a bad play. She looks up into Kaz's unimpressed expression. "…or something."

"' *No'* would have saved you time and energy," he says crossly, his stern gaze made more so by the shadow his hat casts. He takes the seat across the table from her. "And I'm not allowing you credit at either of the clubs, so what do you want?"

"Not that," Jordan says firmly. She crosses her arms over one another and rests her elbows on the table, looking away towards the door with its ornate, fake-gem handle. If only she could just focus on the light bouncing off of it and pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist. For a moment, she feels so silly about all of this—it's not like Kaz knows or cares what her purpose in life is, or when is too late or too soon to grow up and get on with it. But…there's finally enough trust between them that Jordan doesn't have to figure everything out on her own anymore. How wrong can she be, for wanting to take advantage of that?

She takes a deep breath, playing with the end of her braid. "Da. Can I ask you something?" It's a cheap trick, to call him by that name, but the thing is that she knows it'll work. It's not as if Kaz himself would take the high moral road in her situation—or any situation, for that matter.

"Depends on what it is." Immediately, she notices the change in Kaz's voice, like he's drawing together his strength, readying for a fight. Or maybe just restraining any clues to his thoughts that might seep through.

Jordan chances a look back at him. "So…the deadline to enroll at the University is coming up. For fall."

Kaz raises an eyebrow. "Do you want to?"

That's the thing, isn't it? How is Jordan supposed to know? Her parents are bending the world to their respective wills, and as far as she knows, she's now got more formal education than either one of them. When she was little, all she wanted was to be a pirate like her mama. But now, she has a lot of things—people—tying her to land. And it isn't just that. As much as Jordan is like her parents, she wants to be her own. It isn't that she doesn't want to do big things and make big changes—for better or worse, or neither—but she wants to do them on her terms. And she has absolutely no idea what that looks like.

"That's kind of the problem," she says at last. "I…don't know."

In the light of the crystal lamps at the corners of the walls, Kaz's stare is cutting but not cold. It's strangely comforting. "I can't tell you what you want, Jordan."

Maybe she was right and there really isn't a point to having this conversation. But Jordan isn't ready to give up yet. "I want a lot of things that don't exactly agree," she says, hesitantly at first. "I want to be a kid for a little longer. I want to achieve something important. I want to see more of the world. I…want to spend more time with Alby." She gives Kaz a wary look, bracing for his reaction to turn sour at the mention of Alby, but whatever she's expecting, it never comes. That doesn't seem like the thing he's focused on.

Kaz folds his hands around one another. He wears his gloves more for appearances these days than anything else. "I left school when I was nine," he says. "It was a one-room place with a teacher who was barely older than you are now and could never answer my questions. Never went back." His gaze is fixed intently on her, which Jordan takes as a challenge not to look away. "Jesper may know what the chemical name for water is, but I'm richer than he'll ever be, even with his connections."

Jordan almost laughs at that. *Connections.* Then— "Wait, you don't know the chemical name for water?"

Kaz glares at her, but it's—Jordan allows herself a bit of wordplay—a watered-down version of the usual optic weapon. Then his expression turns into what Jordan thinks of as his Serious Da Face—the kind of face that demands she pay attention. "You're too smart for school, Jordan."

Jordan starts wrapping her braid around her hand. "So you think I shouldn't go?"

"I think you can do what you want. As soon as you know what that is."

Jordan exhales, propping her arms on the table. "Guess I'm really stuck, then."

Kaz looks almost amused. "And why's that?"

Because her parents both have their missions, for wealth and justice. They both know, as Inej would say, where their arrows are pointed. And Jordan feels like a compass spinning out of control, like a watch with its hands loose. She slips her hand into her pocket, where the watch always rests, running her thumb over the pattern of the J.R, wondering what her namesake might have done. She doesn't know much about him, but she does know that he died before he ever had to find out.

"Because the things I want are all…fighting and running into each other." Jordan pulls her hand out of her pocket to run her fists into each other, imitating a collision. "And yours all agree, I guess."

Kaz is silent for a moment. His eyes almost unfocus, drifting to some point behind Jordan that she can't see. "Don't be so sure."

Right now, he's Kaz Brekker, the man seated on Ketterdam's crooked throne, the monster who can part crowds and sever lives with a word or the turn of a card. But when Kaz Rietveld comes home tonight, it'll be to his wife and daughter, to the books and the piano and the window boxes in late bloom. Jordan thinks about this, and she wonders.

“Okay,” she says slowly. “Let’s say yours *don’t* all agree. What do you do, then? How do you choose?”

Kaz shifts slightly, and the pale light from the crystal lamps moves over his face. “Decide what you want more.”

Maybe she *should* go out onto the floor, Jordan thinks—spin the wheel or flip a coin and let chance decide for her. But she has a feeling that as soon as the coin is in the air, as soon as the wheel or the card starts to turn, she’ll already know her choice.

If she wants to change the world, she’s got time. And if Alby is worth it, worth spending thoughts on, worth taking chances for, he’ll wait for her. Jordan is too smart for school, and she’s got a world to see. She might as well give that world a taste of what’s coming for it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm basing the age at which Ketterdam University students start on Jesper—he's 16-17 in the Six of Crows duology, and originally came to the city to attend university there.

Inej/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej consider their missions and paths and the ways they diverge.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the week off! Finals are final-ing. Now, back to your regularly scheduled shout-outs~

Oliv_Black, I'm glad you liked it!

Book_Junkie007, I loved this little analysis. Especially since it shows how much character depth and variation they all have.

thephonyqueenofengland, I think the thing here is also that, even though Jordan thinks otherwise, Kaz and Inej are also questioning their respective missions.

Not another confused platypus!, he has come a long way, hasn't he?

cameliawrites, Inej and Jordan know exactly which buttons to push, as it were, lol.

westsevern, I'm so proud of how Jordan has grown up, it's like I raised her XD

Emflamedfeel727, welcome to the fic! I'm glad you're enjoying the journey <3

dakotaawolven, they have such a cute little relationship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej isn’t much of a homemaker. Growing up in the caravan, that wasn’t a problem; her father used to tease her that when she found that boy who knew her favorite song, her favorite flower, she would be the breadwinner with her acrobatics shows—that she’d come home to a husband who sent the children to wash up before brushing every rose petal from her hair with his hands, who made skillet bread almost as good as her mama’s and didn’t mind a bit.

Some days, she thinks she has something near to that. These are the days when evening wanes low, the streetlamps guttering in muted shape behind the curtains, and as she cards rosewater through her hair, Kaz’s hands find hers and take over the job. These are the days when she sees him at the table with Jordan, both of their heads bent over a book lit by

candlelight, and though he pretends not to know she's there, she knows better. On those days, Inej thinks that she would love nothing more than for her papa to have been right.

But Kaz never quite settles. And so, in between those days, she tends to the flowers in the window boxes and sinks her fingers into the rich black earth for a bit too long. She seasons dinner as heavily as Jordan likes, and tries not to think about the *Rare Spices* poster or the fact that Kaz may never make it home to grimace at the taste. She walks with a sway, expecting the ground to move with her, and it never does.

Inej wonders if the feeling of satisfaction, of contentment, of this life being enough, is another thing on the list of all that Heleen took from her. Or maybe she never would've been made for it.

It isn't as bad as it used to be, she reflects. Tonight, for example, she's returning from the Warehouse District, where she has once again taken up training the little spiders. The original set have all stayed on with the Dregs, but there have been others that have moved on—to better, safer things, she prays. There has never been any shortage of them, and Inej supposes that's no surprise; even if Kaz doesn't send her *every* miserable urchin who's fallen on Ketterdam's bad side, only the ones with potential, this city has always been generous with suffering.

Inej puts her hood up against the slow drizzle of rain and ducks into what is less of an alley and more of a narrow passage between two squat, ungracefully constructed buildings. She walks a little more steadily when she has a purpose. Of course, there's the argument to be had that her family should be purpose enough, but that isn't something she's yet ready to face. Her skill has always been to escape, after all—to disappear.

Inej turns onto a narrow street that parallels one of the minor waterways running inland from the harbor. The shortest route home will take her through the Lid; Kaz will appreciate it if she checks in on the Crow and Cup while she's passing through, and these days he might even tell her so. She'd be more likely to come across Kaz if she crosses Goedmedbridge and heads north from there, with the extra benefit of seeing West Stave in its recent squalor, but it's been a long day and she wants to check on Jordan.

As it turns out, perhaps somewhere in the course of their hearts being knit together, their minds have been as well—as Inej slips past the front of the coffeehouse, she sees another reflection move in the window, just in front of her own. She stops on the narrow wooden bridge over the canal as Kaz's shape emerges into relief in the lamplight, walking up a street that meets in a T with hers, his eyes shadowed by the brim of his hat. The desire rises up in her throat to cast it aside, to run her hands through his hair. Inej once thought such urges would subside when they became more possible, but if anything the temptation now is stronger.

She crosses the bridge and walks to the door of the coffeehouse, where Kaz rounds the corner of the building to meet her under the awning. His only greeting is a slight turn of his lips, a softening of the lines around his eyes, but that's what they are—that is the life they've built together. In another world, perhaps he could draw her to him, put his coat around her, cup her face in his hands, kiss her mouth. And perhaps when they get home, he will. But here, now, no one knows the danger of a secret better than they do.

He is the first to speak, his voice a soft burr in the rare quiet of the evening. Most of the barkers and street vendors have been driven further south, or indoors altogether by the rain. It has picked up while Inej crossed the city and now drums steadily on the sleek black awning over their heads. “Jordan is under the impression your berth will be empty again,” he says.

Inej tilts her head, searching for some understanding of what he’s getting at, but he betrays as little of what he’s thinking as he always has. “And why does she think that?”

Kaz’s expression turns rueful, although perhaps she’s the only one who would be able to tell. “Because she’s going to ask you. And you’re going to say yes.”

Inej steps closer, standing as close to him as she dares. “She isn’t the only one who holds sway over me, Kaz.” Her eyes hold steady on his face. She sees the delayed breath that he takes in the slight parting of his lips. Her gaze lingers there for a moment too long.

There are certain things she misses when she is out at sea.

Kaz turns away, the shadow from the awning falling over his face. His profile is cut along hard lines, despite the dim light. “Enough sway to tell her no?”

Turn your eyes to me again, and I might say yes.

“Enough to say…not yet.” Inej looks out towards the dark thread of the canal, which is revealed in changing shape by the yellow moonlight on its surface. “The little spiders still have much to learn.” Her voice has grown soft and thin, despite the consistent beat of the rain overhead.

“I see.” Kaz shifts his hands on the head of his cane. “They owe you. Staying just for that.” When she says nothing, he adds more pointedly, though with a dryness that almost disguises it, “Maybe you are a Saint.”

“Kaz.” Inej knows how reproachful she must sound—scolding him like she used to do. But the way he baited it in those early days, he must not have minded.

“Yes, Inej?” Kaz can no more sound innocent than Ketterdam can smell like spring blossoms.

“I don’t have to say it.” Inej turns her head sharply to meet his eyes. “You don’t really want me to.”

“No. Only to get cross with me.” There is a glitter in Kaz’s eyes, beneath the shadow of his hat. Inej can almost convince herself that he smiles and she isn’t imagining it.

For her part, she gives a frustrated sigh and flings up her hands. “What for?”

Kaz moves past her, out from the shelter of the awning, making a path for home. His cane strikes the pavement in discordant time with the rain. “The face you make.”

How many times, Inej thinks as she watches his form recede down the street, has she been left behind just like this? The perfect parting words hanging in the air, questions snipped so

neatly short?

Despite herself, she smiles. Then she follows as she always has.

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If only his seventeen-year-old self could see him now. He probably would've been disgusted, Kaz thinks—if for nothing else, then for him being so open with Inej. Not long ago, he would never have told her as much as he did just now.

He would scorn the man Kaz is now for compromising with comfort, too. Only men like Per Haskell and Pekka Rollins, men who were content to sit back on their cushioned thrones, would live in a perfectly respectable neighborhood, in a house with white lace curtains and a blue front door, with a carpet from a Ravkan market on the floor and books stacked on the piano. Only those who didn't value what they'd fought for would lock the door behind them and bid a wife and daughter goodnight just as the Barrel came to life.

But that is what Kaz does now. He makes his way up the shallow front steps and through the door and notes that he is being followed—because how long will it be before that feeling is gone again?

He looks through the open doorway to the kitchen. Jordan has her feet propped up on the table and is making her way through a concerningly large stack of stroopwafels, occasionally brushing crumbs off of the newspaper she's reading. Kaz pauses, wondering how long it will take her to notice he's looking.

After a moment, Jordan slowly looks up and blinks at him. In lieu of a greeting, she says, "Fleet of ships went down a few miles out of the harbor. They're trying to figure out which mercher they belonged to."

"Isn't that usually obvious?" Inej seems to materialize to his left and crosses into the kitchen, sweeping the plate out from under Jordan's nose. Jordan makes a noise of protest.

"Going out or coming in?" Kaz questions, which he finds to be the more pertinent detail. If the ships were leaving, it would be easy enough to attach a name to them, unless of course they were trying to be covert.

"Coming back," Jordan says with a laugh, her good mood returning with a speed that rivals Jesper's. "Can you imagine? I wouldn't claim them either, if they barely made it out of the harbor."

"Could've been overloaded with cargo." Inej returns to the circle of light cast by Jordan's lantern, solidifying from a shadow in the dark into the low-lit form of the woman he loves. Such thoughts come to him so casually these days, and it makes Kaz wonder. He is still the most vicious thing walking the streets of the Barrel, but this second life holds an allure that he doesn't understand enough to fight it.

Jordan looks up, turning her curious gaze to Kaz. "That cargo could be worth something. Could you send Andrei to check it out?"

Andrei is a new Dregs initiate, and more importantly, a Squaller. The son of two Ravkan refugees who settled in Little Ravka, he'd gotten himself into debt with the Liddies and almost wound up contracted to them before Kaz sent Simon to offer him better terms. The Liddies had been nipping at his heels since he started expanding further north, so it had been particularly satisfying to snatch a Grisha from their grasp.

"Not unless I want to put him on a ship on its way out of harbor," Kaz replies, joining Inej and Jordan in the kitchen and sitting at the table, stretching out his bad leg and resting his cane against his hip.

As he'd expected, Jordan gives Inej a sideways look. "We could—I mean, you could take him with you. On your next voyage."

Inej is casting him a look. Kaz holds himself very still, observant as always. Jordan isn't in the right mood to receive this, and for all he knows Inej isn't either, but the thought that keeps eating away at him is that *next* could just as easily be *last.* Especially since Jordan mentioned that merchant fleet.

And what if they're both on that ship? He'll turn around and Jordie will be there, side by side with the boy he was, scorn in their clouded eyes, ashamed of him. *It's shame that eats men whole.* He will have to destroy this place, this life. He will have nothing to leave behind but the same thing as always— *damage.* Is it inevitable? Is breaking and destroying all that he knows how to do? *Brekker,* breaker. That's the name he chose for himself. This family may go by Rietveld, but if he loses them, that will be all he has left.

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When they return to their room, he braids Inej's hair.

She is quiet, her eyes occasionally flicking up to the mirror, as Kaz dips his bare hands in the little china bowl of rosewater and runs it down the length of the finished plait. It will fall in soft waves in the morning, dark and shining to her waist, and Kaz will feel the now-familiar ache behind his sternum again. For now, she looks up at their reflections, her eyes deep and soulful in the low light. And at last, she says with a slight smile, "I'm afraid I'm getting used to this."

With hands that have broken and killed and destroyed, Kaz smoothes the braid over her shoulder, lingering against the warmth of her skin. "Is that so terrible?" he says softly, his voice rough in his throat.

Inej shakes her head and turns around on the dressing-table stool to face him. "Yes. I miss it on the nights you don't come home." She inhales, then adds, "And I will miss it more if… you never do."

Kaz feels the old urge to turn away, to not look her in the face when she dares to be so honest. It isn't his language. He's too late to learn it. "This city killed me once. It's been trying ever since."

Inej looks down at her hands where they rest in the folds of her nightdress. “Death is not your friend, Kaz. It isn’t your ally and it’s not your servant. It can betray you.”

He wants to tell her he can spot a traitor a mile off, brush it aside. But he hasn’t forgotten Jordie’s voice saying almost the same thing— *Greed may do your bidding, but death serves no man.* He moves away from the mirror, not wanting to look at himself any longer. “Then what about you? Death is not your cutlass or your first mate. Death is the storms, the bullets.” *The man you make your bed with, built only to destroy.* “Don’t tell me you’ve tired of being dangerous.”

In his periphery, he sees Inej rise to her feet and soundlessly approach him. “Only of having to, Kaz.”

Kaz feels his jaw tense. *Then stay,* he wants to say. He is greedy and selfish and jealous, everything a thief and a rich man must be, and he knows that the slaves and the indentures need her more, but he *wants* her more than they do. And that isn’t just, it isn’t fair, but he is neither and has never expected the world to be. Inej knows what he is.

Inej sets a hand on his arm, gently turning him to face her. He doesn’t want to, but then he can’t look away. “What else are we meant to do, Kaz? Lead normal lives?”

We could try. The rebellious thought rises from an empty space in his chest. Who would dare to tell them what they can’t do? The odds are theirs to change. And maybe he hasn’t built an empire on wild hopes, but that *is* how it started.

When he says nothing, Inej goes on. “There is so much hurt, so many people I may never save. Maybe it will be too much. But I refuse to not try while I have the chance.”

In other cases, she hasn’t had a problem with trusting the broken to mend itself. But then again, he did, didn’t he? He shut himself in this house with the bookshelves and the piano, left his gloves behind, and learned to apologize. To try again.

That isn’t destruction, is it? The voice is kinder than Jordie’s has ever been. Maybe it could be his own.

“Jordan still needs to see the apple trees,” he says.

Inej puts her arms around him, rests her head against his chest. Kaz finds himself drawing her closer.

“We all will,” she says. She doesn’t smell like sea salt anymore. Just roses.

Chapter End Notes

When you've lived as much as these two, you start having a mid-life crisis in your early 30s, lol.

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby and Jordan go on a date. No one gets injured, surprisingly enough.

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY for disappearing on you guys! Life has been extra life-y lately, but fear not—I have returned :)

So, before ados are in any way furthered, here are your shout-outs~

jzmn8r, there is so much to be said about the kaz vs. emotional expression battle, which I think will basically be never-ending. It's such a complete reverse of all his survival tactics—if you want to survive, feelings must be put out of the equation.

simpforjamespotter, the thing about Kanej that puts an arrow through my heart every time is that there is quite literally no one else for them. Each of them is the only person that could understand the other well enough to build a life with them.

thephonyqueenofengland, when you age out of your reckless nihilism, you find that you have something to live for, and that really ups the stakes.

westsevern, they are also stressed for each other, so you're in good company.

arggghhh, honestly, I'm jealous of the binge-readers who arrive this late in the game. I would love to have that experience, of watching these characters evolve (and lord knows I've probably evolved as a writer, lol.)

Pipperdoo, I hope you love this one too!

Justalittlefrog, I laughed when you called this a "book", because yes, by length standards, it could probably be two by now XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alby meets her on Speaker’s Bridge, the gray sunlight seeping through his shirtsleeves and making the hairs on his arms stand up. He knows there’s always a chill hanging about Ketterdam, but even in the countryside it’s been one of those makeshift summers where it never gets quite warm enough—where everyone just ignores the gooseflesh sticking out of everyone else’s cutoffs and rolled sleeves.

It's almost autumn now, which is why he's back in the city—even if he technically shouldn't have returned yet. He gave every excuse short of begging to come back to Ketterdam early, finally landing himself a spot as a mentor to orient the incoming University students, but the weather had nothing to do with it. Jordan's spelling is much improved from the letters they used to write one another, but the writing still doesn't compare to actually being around her, hearing the almost-laugh she gives when he teases her, seeing the little gestures she makes as she talks. He just doesn't like that he couldn't get a read on his father—that he still can't tell if his da knows his real reasons for coming back so soon.

Jordan is leaning against the rail, her arms bare and gleaming bronze in the sun. The slight outline of her lithe muscles moves when she presses against the rail and leans forward, further out over the Boekcanal. Alby stops walking for a minute before he remembers where is, whereupon he gives himself a mental kick and crosses the rest of the distance to her.

They're far enough inland that the salt and fish scent of the harbor is faint—here, it mostly smells of flowers. Alby joins Jordan at the rail, and for a moment it's silent, except for the cry of gulls somewhere far off and the voices of a debate arising from the other end of the bridge.

"Hi," he says.

Lightning-quick, Jordan turns around so that she's leaning back on the rail now, elbows propped against it. A grin splits her face, white teeth flashing in the sunlight that reaches them from bare patches in the overcast sky. "You're right on time."

Alby laughs softly. "And how do *you* know?"

Jordan withdraws a weathered watch from an apparently hidden pocket in the quilted breeches she's wearing. She shakes it at him before putting it away; there's something engraved on the back, but Alby doesn't catch what it is. "I've been checking," she says smugly.

"I haven't seen you check," Alby argues for the sake of arguing. He enjoys the slight pout that crosses her face, but what he enjoys even more is the fact that he predicted it.

"You know I never get caught," Jordan shoots back. "Why even ask?"

"Well, this *is* the place people come to debate." Alby squints up at the sky. His heart feels rather higher up in his chest than it normally is. That's…probably fine. "Though, they usually have stronger points to make."

Jordan steps away from the rail, crossing her arms defiantly. A pair of students clutching coffee cups some yards away give the pair of them an odd look. "I have *evidence* ."

"No, no." Alby waves a hand. "Not you. Me. I just…I like messing with you," he admits, looking away. Water laps against the side of the bridge. He half expects her to laugh.

Because he's staring at the rough planks of Speaker's Bridge, trying very hard to remember what he learned last year about normal pulse rates, he can't see Jordan's face. He only hears

that her voice has taken on an odd tone when she says, “Well…don’t stop.”

He turns back to look at her. “What?”

Jordan immediately draws her shoulders back, her expression guarded. “I don’t mind it. That’s all. Maybe that ruins the point, though.”

Alby says a very belated, “Oh.”

He probably shouldn’t be surprised by this. She *did* agree to go on a date with him, even if it mostly consisted of her beating up a pair of grown men while Alby had several heart attacks —of a very different sort than he’d been expecting. Different than the one he’s having now, to be sure. All that is to say that Alby is not stupid; he should probably be able to tell that Jordan isn’t utterly repulsed by him. But being around her makes his thoughts go sideways.

“D’you know what—” Alby looks around. The buildings of the University district line the canal to either side, mostly austere libraries with iron-rimmed windows and gargoyles on the roofs, but he knows that there are little coffeehouses, eateries, and shops tucked among them if one knows where to look. “If we follow the canal north, there’s this coffee place a ways up from here. No more lecturers staring at us, or expounding about economics in the background.”

Jordan is looking at the two students who’d given them a glance earlier, but then she turns her gaze to him. “Do they have hot chocolate?”

Alby finds that swallowing fear is a lot like swallowing black coffee. It’s bitter, and it burns. But eventually, it will become necessary, and maybe he’ll even warm to the taste. So, he reaches for Jordan’s hand. “As it happens, they do.”

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Sometimes, Alby thinks that Jordan applies her stealth unnecessarily—for example, take the fact that they’re walking in the door of the Book and Bean before he realizes that she is now holding his arm. He doesn’t say anything, but he knows that she must have registered the stutter in his movement, because he can see her smirking in his periphery.

The Book and Bean is a small and tidy place, floors done in black-and-white tile like the halls of the rich merchers’ houses, walls paneled in gleaming wood and lit by bulbous glass lamps that hang overhead. Black- and white-cushioned chairs cluster around the tables like students bent over a map.

The girl behind the counter is a fellow student, straw-blonde and freckled, Kerch country stock. Alby had a class with her last year, but he can’t for the life of him remember her name. She is, however, raising her eyebrows at him in an amused sort of way, which he finds unnecessarily irritating.

They pass below a lamp hung from repurposed iron chains as they approach the counter, and Jordan says, “Two hot chocolates”, before Alby can get a word out. He gives her a look.

She sighs heavily.

He keeps looking.

“ *Please,”* Jordan says sullenly.

His classmate—What was her *name?* He thinks it started with an E—just raises her eyebrows a little higher. “And who’s paying?”

Alby doesn’t have to look at Jordan to imagine the expression she’s wearing. “I don’t know,” she says, her voice sugary sweet. “Who *is* paying?”

He hears other boys and men complain often about how women are impossible to understand, but Alby really thinks that they haven’t seen anything until they’ve met this one. One minute, she’s scrambling his thoughts and making his heart run amok like a wild rabbit, and the next she’s making him want to book the next ship home. “Well,” he says wearily, “I’m certainly not going to fight you for it.”

“No, you’re not,” Jordan agrees cheerfully, almost singing.

Alby considers it a virtue that he knows when he’s been beaten. “I’ve got it,” he says, sighing once again.

His classmate looks moments away from laughing. Alby really needs to remember her name so that he can exact a proper amount of revenge. “That’ll be out in a minute,” she says, tapping the cash tray before she disappears into the storeroom.

Barely a second after she’s gone, Jordan stands on her toes to whisper in his ear. “I could slip our total out of the drawer. You’d have it back before anyone knew.” Her breath brushes against his neck. Alby swallows hard.

“Uh,” he says, blinking a few times to shuffle his thoughts back into order like a stack of papers. “No. What—no, no, you’re not doing that.”

“No fun,” Jordan trills as she lets go of his arm and strolls away to find them a table. “No fun at all.”

Alby watches her for a moment before he walks after her to catch up, wondering for the thousandth time how sure he is of what he’s gotten himself into.

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Jordan takes a long sip of her hot chocolate, leaving a line of whipped cream on her upper lip. Alby pointedly ignores the urge to wipe it away with his thumb—or his mouth. He really needs to pull himself together. But in this, as in seemingly all areas of his life, the threads are too worn to do much more than hold on.

“So what was your excuse for coming back early?” she asks.

“To see you,” Alby replies, raising an eyebrow almost as if in challenge. Jordan gives a particularly pleased smile at this.

“I mean, what did you tell your da, *shevrati.* ” She has told him before that this word means *know-nothing,* that it’s usually applied to the non-Suli as a mild insult, but the way she says it is so laden with endearment that Alby can’t bring himself to mind. He doesn’t think he’s meant to, anyway.

He thinks of arguing with her again, just for the fun of it. *What do you mean? I told him I wanted to make eyes at the daughter of his greatest enemy for a bit, and he said wonderful, let’s throw a party before you go.* But even though they both know what he knows, he’s somehow afraid to say it. Like maybe they could forget, and things could go back to the way they were. But the truth has endless stamina, and eventually they’ll tire of running from it. “I got a job as a mentor for orientation,” he says instead. “It took a lot of talking myself up and getting recommendations, plus some begging.” He gives a slightly crooked, if sheepish, grin.

“When’s that start?” Jordan asks, stirring her hot chocolate slowly.

“Next week.” Alby hesitates, drumming his fingers on the rim of his cup. It’s so quiet here compared to the rest of the city—just murmuring voices and the occasional clacking dish, no steerers or barkers shouting and hawking wares to passers-by. This is the Ketterdam he knows, but he wonders if Jordan will ever get used to it—she seems uneasy with the silence. He has his reasons for hoping that she will. “Will I…see you there?”

Jordan sighs, and he already knows the answer. “Not this year,” she says. Alby expects her to elaborate, to ramble on in the way that she does, but she is oddly reticent for once, so he prompts her.

“Why not? I thought—”

“I just…I want to be a kid for a while longer,” Jordan says, quickening the pace of her stirring, looking down into her cup. “You can’t even imagine half of what growing up was like for me. I was raised on adventure. I don’t know if I can just shut myself in a classroom and read about things I’d rather be out there living.”

That was my whole life , Alby wants to say. Stuck in a house in the middle of nowhere, with tutors and nursemaids for company, kept like a watch in a safe. Jordan was the one to pick the lock, to break in and steal him from everything he’d ever known. Selfishly, he doesn’t want her to move on—he’s afraid to be locked up again.

“So…you’ll just run around the city for a while longer? Do some gambling on East Stave? Start a prize-fighting ring? I mean—” He exhales, trying to martial his thoughts into order and out of their current, frustrated spiral. “We’ve all got to grow up at some point.”

Jordan pushes her cup away. “I already told you. I’m going to *live.* I’ll be off traveling. But maybe that’s for the best—if you’ve gotten all stuffy and you’re just going to lecture me—” She rises as if to leave, and Alby panics. He puts his hands over the one of hers that remains on the table.

“It’s not like that,” he says, a pleading note in his voice. “I just…I’m being selfish, all right? I came back early to see you. I want you here. I was going crazy this summer, pacing the house, driving everyone around me mad too, because—I knew there was so much more out there.”

Jordan doesn’t sit back down, doesn’t speak, but she does stay still. She meets his eyes and nods slowly—not an agreement, exactly, but she’s allowing him to go on.

The words spill from him in a rush. “Before—before you, my world was so small, and I had no idea. I’d go for a stroll through the woods and think I’d seen all there was. But then you showed up, with this—courage, like I’d never seen before. All I’d ever seen, from my da, from the people he kept around, was fear. But you’ve always been…made of courage. It’s like nothing scares you. And all of a sudden, a million more things were possible, and so… that world was too small for me. I’d grown out of it overnight.” He’s been looking into Jordan’s eyes this whole time, holding to her determined stare like a lifeline, and so he sees the very second that they change. He sees the smile that appears in them like a sunrise.

“...I just ran face-first into the point, didn’t I?” he says. If he feels trapped with this new revelation that there is so much living to do, how would Jordan feel? Jordan, who has never known anything *but* freedom?

Jordan takes her seat again, cradling her cup in her hands. “It really was impressive to watch,” she agrees, not hiding her amusement.

Alby lets out a shaky breath that comes out as more of a laugh. “Thanks, I guess.”

His hand is still covering Jordan’s. She turns it to interlace their fingers. “This world,” she says, looking around, “could be big enough for me with you in it. Just…not yet.”

Between the hand that’s holding Jordan’s and the one curled around his cup, Alby can’t decide which makes him feel warmer.

Chapter End Notes

the use of "shevrati" comes with a heavy amount of extrapolation done by me; we don't know much beyond the literal meaning in canon, and I'm a sucker for inter-lingual endearments/teasing, so there you go.

also, Alby for president of the Simp Association.

Inej/Jordan

Chapter Summary

Kaz lets go. Jordan says something impulsive.

Chapter Notes

We are back in business, folks! And that means it's time for shout-outs~

Not another confused platypus!, poor Alby only knows the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

BeluKertasOrang, they really are the cutest <3

jzmn8r, I really can't handle the adorableness.

thephonyqueenofengland, these kids are so weirdly wholesome, considering who their parents are.

cameliawrites, teasing is a love language, and I will die on that hill.

JustaBoredFrog, how can you *not* smile while reading about those two?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Standing on the docks, Inej wonders why she ever tried to deny that she would find herself here again.

When the salt air off the harbor hits her lungs, it feels like the first proper breath she's taken in a long time. And she almost hates that—why should the air of their home, floral and spiced, not be enough for her? Why not ink and coffee, even? And it's not as if there haven't been moments when she has convinced herself it *is* enough. It's just that they are only moments, only a small ship against the current that draws her back to sea.

From behind her, Kaz's rock-salt rasp brushes her ear. "I did say you'd say yes."

Inej shuts her eyes, knowing it won't shut him out. And she doesn't want to as much as she once would've. Once, when all she knew how to do was hide, she would've left before he awoke, followed the stars away from the city and anyone who might say she was wrong. "I held out for as long as I could, Kaz. But I can't tend a garden or a table when I know that there are still those out there, like me, who I could save."

He is silent, but somehow his silence overshadows the rush of the waves and the dockhands' voices. Even when he steps into her line of view, Kaz is all severe lines, hands tucked into his coat, the brim of his hat pulled low. Inej sees a muscle twitch in the stern cut of his jaw.

She takes a step closer. "What if someone could have found me before Heleen and taken me off that ship, but they chose to be safe at home?"

"True. They could have spared you from this." Kaz's voice falls like a hammer, like the one that almost broke her. *I would come for you.* Inej believes that he still would, but—she sees the hammer glint at the top of its arc. Kaz doesn't give a look or gesture to explain what he's referring to, but he doesn't have to—Inej understands. And somehow that makes her angrier, that he thinks she regrets the life she has with him, despite the fact that her understanding him at all is proof to the contrary.

She holds his gaze. They've worked too hard to become better than this. "I know you won't put faith in the Saints to guide me, Kaz, but at least put some in me."

He looks away, staring out over the gray waters of the harbor, but Inej can see the lines of tension that rise as he works his jaw. They each have their own current, she thinks, determined to draw them apart; now she knows why Kaz looks to the harbor in times like this. She knows he is hearing his brother's voice, being pulled out to sea by ghosts she cannot save him from. She wonders what it's saying.

She doesn't know if she *needs* Kaz to believe in her. But she wants him to. "It was you who sent me away to begin with," she says, "who gave me the ship." *What's changed?* But she knows exactly what—they have a home together, and they have Jordan, and they have the wedding bands that they keep secret, under his gloves and around her neck on a chain. She knows that Kaz is the most dangerous thing walking the streets of this city, but even she, some nights, wishes she could keep him out of the Barrel for good. It's just—she knows what he is. Why can't he see the same thing about her?

"I'm not stopping you, Inej," he says, his voice low and tightly strung. The fog has rolled in from the harbor, and it clings to his severe silhouette. Inej feels the illogical urge to hold on to him before he's hidden completely.

"I won't make you say goodbye," she says, taking another step closely. "But at least let go. I don't want to force your hand to open." Neither one of them likes that she could, she imagines.

He wasn't like this earlier in the morning, Inej thinks—laying for an extra few minutes beside her, his arm draped lazily over her side, his features softened by the gray light of dawn, as if it might make her forget to leave. Perhaps, in some part, they're both wishing they were there again. But she suspects that they both also know it is not what she needs.

She is standing at Kaz's shoulder now, her hand dangling so close to his that it would take almost nothing to interlace them. But she doesn't. "Don't ask me to stay," she says softly. *I'm afraid I would say yes.*

At last, Kaz turns around, and it's as if he kept a bit of the harbor in his eyes—Inej can see the waves reflected in their dark shine. "I won't, Inej." And to her, she knows, he'll always keep his word.

She exhales quietly. The commotion hasn't changed around them, but they seem wreathed in stillness nonetheless. After glancing around to be certain no one is looking, she leans into him and rests her head on his shoulder. "I know."

They stand there for a moment; Kaz shifts some weight away from his cane, and then they're leaning against one another, holding each other up. An inexplicable ache blossoms in Inej's chest. But the world goes on—sailors coil and uncoil ropes, and crows pick at the scraps they toss aside, and somewhere across the True Sea, there is a girl sleeping a few extra minutes, thinking she'll be home to make up for it tomorrow. Someone has to make sure that she is.

"Promise me one thing," Kaz murmurs against her hair. Despite herself, Inej smiles; she should've known he would never make a one-sided promise. Everything is a deal. To be fair, that is her language too—it's the one he taught her. "If you sense trouble, you'll write to me."

"I'll be hunting slavers," she says with a slight laugh, looking up at him. "When is there not trouble?"

"I would come for you," Kaz repeats, his eyes intent on hers. "If you're halfway across the world, this city can rot."

If Inej is smiling, it's—almost in disbelief. Not that Kaz would harbor such thoughts, but that he would say them. Usually, they have to treat the point of a conversation like a well-guarded manor—they have to stake it out, circle it, run reconnaissance, and then finally break in without leaving a sign that they were ever there. Kaz has effectively just strolled in the front door, and she's waiting for sirens to start blaring.

"So you'll, what—bribe your way onto a ship?" she asks, the breathy ghost of a laugh riding on her voice.

Kaz's black-coffee stare doesn't change, and if anything, he holds her closer still. "If I have to, I'll beg."

This hits like a hammer's blow, but completely different than the one she was expecting. Nonetheless, Inej feels like the wind has been knocked from her. She searches his face for any dramatics, any sign of a lie, but even with Kaz being as good of a liar as he is, she cannot doubt now that he is telling the truth.

There are no words for this. But they don't need to subsist on words alone anymore. She buries her head against his chest, wrapping her arms fully around him, shutting her eyes tight. *Come with me now* , she wants to say. *Let the city rot. Let the clubs run themselves or run into the ground.* But she can no more ask him to come with her than he can ask her to stay.

"Promise me one more thing," says Kaz.

She laughs softly. "Never something for nothing, Kaz."

His thumb moves gently over the curve of her spine. "You married a thief, treasure. Let me steal one more promise from you."

And Inej knows that she will; for him, all of her locks are undone, her safes left open, her armor set aside.

"Don't get cross with me while you're gone. Save it until I can see your face again." She feels Kaz's arm settle across her back, wrapping his coat partway around her. There is so much strength in his embrace, and suddenly Inej knows that if she doesn't leave now, she never will.

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Despite having asked him to be there, Jordan is still pleasantly surprised at the sight of a familiar red-headed figure standing on the stone wall above the docks. She'd told Alby to meet her several berths down from the one where the *Sankt Petyr* is docked—almost all the way into Fourth Harbor—since, as much as she trusts him, revealing Inej and her laundry list of titles doesn't seem like a good idea just yet. Plus, she suspects that if she revealed her parents' relationship to someone who could take it back to one of his greatest enemies, Kaz would never forgive her.

"You're up early," she teases, trotting the last couple of steps to stand beside Alby.

He turns a particularly dour look towards her, and she sees now that he is clutching a cup of coffee from that place they went a few weeks ago—the Book and Bean. Steam curls off the rim of the cup and joins the fog hanging heavy in the air.

"And I hope you remember it," he grouses, take a sip of the coffee—which, upon further inspection, appears to be at least half-full of milk. "I deserve points for this."

"What kind of points?" says Jordan mischievously, bumping her shoulder into his. She almost laughs at the sight of how quickly his ears go red.

"Uh—brownie points? Points that are redeemable for you to sacrifice something as precious as my sleep?" Alby suggests, talking a bit too fast.

"We need a shorter name for those," Jordan muses. "Good boyfriend points?"

If she thought his ears were red before, now they look positively sunburnt. Jordan half-expects him to spit out his coffee. "Uh—am I?"

Jordan looks sideways at him, hands tucked into her pockets, trying to pretend she doesn't feel her heart beating against her ribcage. Well, they were going to have to have this conversation eventually—though, for someone who has all the grace of a trained spy and acrobat, her segues could use some work. "What? A good boyfriend?"

"Let's just start with *boyfriend,"* says Alby, a little frantically. Jordan notices that he talks with his hands when he's nervous or excited. She also notices that it's, frankly, absurdly cute.

She probably should've thought this one through a little more, but while Jordan has Kaz's talent for scheming when she wants to, she isn't *always* working an angle, and she often forgets. Especially when Alby is giving her a grimace that is impossible to take seriously, and talking in a voice that's low and scratchy from sleep. "Sure," she says, feigning nonchalance. She isn't at all certain that it's working. "I mean, if you want to."

"No, I do—I, yeah, I want to, it's just—" Alby lets out a long, rather frustrated breath. "Couldn't you have maybe sprung this on me at a time that *wasn't* when you're about to leave?" He runs a hand through his hair, and suddenly Jordan feels a wave of guilt wash over her.

She didn't think of that. She kind of wasn't thinking at all.

"Well…we had to talk about it anyway," she says. She hates how childish, almost sulky, she sounds. She should probably just apologize, but something in her won't allow it.

"All the more reason to do it sooner," says Alby, and Jordan can tell that he's trying to be patient, which just makes her feel worse.

She looks out over the harbor, where the mist hangs low over the water, so low that it looks like the waves are steaming. "Consider it a parting gift?" she suggests, knowing it's a weak reply.

"Jordan." The almost disappointed way that he says it, she can tell that Alby knows it too.

She turns to face him, the salt breeze running through her hair like a cool, soft hand. "You're right," she says with a slight sigh. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Alby gives her a wry smile. "That's a first."

Jordan knows there's sarcasm in it, but honestly she's just happy to have him—her *boyfriend* — smiling at her. "So you still want to be…together?"

Alby looks away, adjusting his jacket, but Jordan can see him suppressing a smile. "Of course I do," he says. He is doing a terrible job of hiding how happy he looks, which is unfairly endearing.

Jordan flings her arms around him, leaning back to look him in the face. The scent of books and coffee clings to his jacket. "Does that make that our first fight?"

Alby gives her a confused smile. "I guess so."

"Then we got together and had our first fight in the same conversation," Jordan points out with a laugh.

Alby wraps an arm around her, pulling her close against him. Jordan feels as if she should close her eyes, but she doesn't—she keeps them open, taking in the sight of the waves sprawling before them, the distant speck of a ship on the horizon. It could be coming or going, carrying passengers, cargo, or contraband, but either way, who knows what it'll meet between where it's been and where it's going? Jordan is suddenly overwhelmed by the

presentness of the moment, of possibilities flooding in and changing every time she takes a breath. She can feel Alby's heartbeat.

"I'm gonna miss you," she says, in a much smaller voice than she means to.

Alby doesn't say anything. He just rests his chin on top of her head, and maybe it's Jordan's imagination, but she thinks he holds her a little tighter, too.

She doesn't want to remind him he's going to have to let go. Maybe because she doesn't want to remember.

Chapter End Notes

just a *little* bit of emotional whiplash. As a treat.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan is a proper pirate and gets an idea.

Chapter Notes

apologies for the sporadic breaks! they keep my sanity and writing quality intact, but feedback suffers and I do miss you all *hugs* have a long chapter to make it up :)

also, I forgot to mention this a while ago, but I was on a podcast!. We discussed my dark past in the HTTYD fandom, my long list of sadboi faves, and of course, the beauty of kanej. it's called "canonically incorrect", ep 84, and you can listen to it wherever pods are cast! I will also attempt to drop a link in the end notes.

okay, so with that spiel done, time for shout-outs~

jzmn8r, I think you very nicely stated the contrast between Kaz and Inej and Jordan and Alby, lol.

SilvervFirefly, your comment made me think that Jordan probably has a lot more insight into healthy relationships than most people her age, considering how hard-earned her parents' is.

Not another confused platypus!, I was re-reading some of the earlier chapters this week and definitely feeling proud of how far they've come.

thephonyqueenofengland, loving the parallels to the dock scene!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From what she thinks in a very apt position in the crow's nest, Jordan is the first one to spot the ship they've been tracking amid the moon-dappled waves. She leans out over the edge, looking between the dim, moving shapes down on the deck until she spots Nia, and holds up her hand in a signal.

Nia, a more recent addition to the crew, originally from Novyi Zem, signals back and shouts across the deck to the others. Jordan, for her part, leaps out of the crow's nest and into the rigging, ready to scamper down once Inej makes the call. If she's lucky, she'll get to help

behind the cannons on the *Sankta Alina* ; if not, Inej will send her belowdecks to keep her head down, which she is really hoping to be spared from this time.

Slowly—though, not so slowly for a ship, she supposes—the *Sankt Petyr* turns towards the *Wandering Heart* (a weirdly fanciful name for a ship dealing in human lives, Jordan thinks), almost as if to pull alongside it. The other two Saints hang back behind it, ready to circle and eventually close in. Their target is not a warship, more of a well-armed carrier, which makes it brutish, but heavy and slow. By the starlight—there are more stars over the True Sea than she's ever seen at once—she can see that the flag that it's flying is Kerch, but that means next to nothing, since merchant ships almost never sail alone. Besides, it is not carrying its intended cargo—if their intel is good.

(It is, considering who they got it from.)

Jordan glances down again and sees the now-familiar pattern of the crew organizing, numbers growing as more of them emerge from belowdecks. They're still a small crew, but as Jordan and Inej know well—and as the hulking carrier in front of them is about to find out—size is rarely the most important thing.

Jordan takes her place in the rhythm by shifting her grip on the rigging and climbing most of the way down before leaping onto the deck. Once there, she's met by Sinyen Kir-Yinam, now the first mate. Sinyen is one of the only remaining members of the *Wraith's* crew; some, like Fionn, have long since fallen, while some have joined other crews in the intervening years, and still others have settled on land—last Jordan heard, Specht had reunited with a long-lost sweetheart and was now living in a comically small house with a comparatively large garden.

Sinyen has her well-loved pair of curved swords strapped to her back, a crimson bandanna tied over her hair, and a luminous smirk in her golden eyes. "Yes, we're letting you out of the box," she says when she sees Jordan's hopeful expression, the smirk widening.

Jordan pumps her fist. "Target practice?" That's her favorite job—throwing knives at people. Her aim isn't quite as good as Inej's, but it's plenty good enough to turn a slaver into a pincushion.

"Not this time," says Sinyen, casting a sideways glance towards the endless expanse of dark water. "Kaatje will need someone watching her back."

Jordan parses the reasoning for this: big, well armed ship equals people will get hurt, equals they need their medik in one piece. Equals, they need their best fighters on the proverbial front lines. Equals, Jordan is not one of those best fighters, so she can be put somewhere else. There are other, perfectly good reasons to not have her in the very thick of the fight—she's younger, less experienced, and whoever puts the captain's daughter in harm's way will be minced like an onion and thrown overboard—but this is the one that stings the most.

But sometimes, Jordan needs to be a loyal pirate more than a proud and stubborn teenager, so she just nods. "On it."

The ship and the name may have changed, but the legend of the ghost ship has not faded. They approach as they always have—quickly, silently, cloaked in darkness, carried by the wind like a thrown blade—and Jordan knows it's only a matter of time before fear fills the night air like smoke. There's no place like Ketterdam to teach you that reputation matters.

The waves barely whisper as the *Sankt Petyr* glides over them, and most of the crew members are only silhouettes against the low-hanging half-moon. Jordan can dimly make out the shape of Inej at the wheel, made distinctive by the hat that Jordan and Kaz gave to her. The others move about in relative silence; some of them have yet to learn the art of going unnoticed as Jordan and Inej have, but at this distance that won't make or break the ambush.

Soon, lines will be thrown, whistling, out over the water; soon, grappling hooks will sink into the boards of the *Wandering Heart* . Soon, the Reaper of Ships and her crew will board the *Wandering Heart* and spread over it, silent and deadly as a sickness. In the best encounters, they make a clean kill of the night watch and catch the slavers on the back foot, sometimes even waking them with pistols and blades. Most of the time, though, the slavers are vicious and paranoid in defense of their cargo, which in Jordan's opinion is when things get exciting. She just wishes she'd be allowed to board one of these days.

She meets Kaatje almost all the way back at the stern; their medik wears a broad leather belt that holds her most critical tools, bandages and scissors and the like. For security's sake alone, it would be safest to keep their Kaatje belowdecks during a raid, but their battles are quick and brutal, and they can't risk being unable to drag someone back to her in time. Hence the assignment of someone—in this case, Jordan—to save the one who saves everyone else.

"What are we expecting?" Jordan asks. Her meager possessions are all safely stored away, otherwise she'd pull out a coin and flip it. "Want to bet on it?"

Sure, it's not exactly good form to bet on their crewmates meeting some calamity or other. But, at least to Jordan, it's better than being dour and dire about it. That's the surest way to make certain that things *do* go wrong.

Kaatje just gives Jordan a flat, unimpressed look. "Blunt force and bullets. If they're anything like their ship, they'll have no finesse." She is typical country Kerch; economically minded, efficient in everything, well-muscled and as tan as the Kerch ever get. She was as much of a farmhand as her brothers before taking to the life of a seafaring mercenary, and from what Jordan knows, most of her early practice with healing was done on livestock.

For now, Jordan and Kaatje take cover in the narrow hallway that leads back to the captain's quarters; meanwhile, their crewmates begin to board the *Wandering Heart* —like a spider spinning its web, the *Sankt Petyr* is slowly lashed to the slaver ship, and her crew swings and climbs across, silent but for the slight *thunk* of grappling hooks and the swish of ropes in the wind. The night breeze is only slight, but it joins the fight like another ally—they have learned to match its movements, to answer when it sets up a point for them to launch, to dance with it and around it. This is what she couldn't turn down, Jordan thinks; the university is full of possibility, and of course it has Alby, but she knew as she knows now that she would forever regret giving up this chance.

She wonders if Inej feels the same.

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Their night watch is quick. Before Jordan can get a read on what happened, from what she can see, the deck of the slaver ship is alive with combatants, but no one has gone to their cannons yet—after all, the ships are lashed together. If one goes down, the other will sink with it.

“They’re trying to cut the ropes,” Jordan mutters, watching an unfamiliar silhouette—so presumably one of the slavers—move towards the nearest side of the ship, presumably after one of their hooks.

“They won’t until they’ve crossed,” says Kaatje, leaning against the rough-paneled wall of the short passageway.

“Would they?”

“Wouldn’t *you* want to be the one who took out the Scourge of the Seas, if you could?” Kaatje gives a humorless smile.

“I’m her daughter, so no,” says Jordan, but she’s willfully missing the point. Kaatje doesn’t spare the effort of rolling her eyes.

A gunshot rings out somewhere.

“Told you,” says Kaatje.

Just then, Nia’s voice rings out, much nearer than Jordan was expecting. “Kaatje!”

The dry humor and languid air vanish from Kaatje, and she moves down the passageway, out onto the main deck. It’s chaos if you don’t know how to parse it—the night is suddenly alive with the ring of steel, grunts and crewmates calling to one another. Most of them are still on the *Wandering Heart* , but those returning to the *Sankt Petyr* are being pursued. It takes a second to spot Nia, but when she does, Jordan sees that she’s leading the charge, half-carrying a stick-thin blonde girl.

“Well,” says Kaatje, surveying the scene, “At least they found them.” Then she meets Nia halfway, already putting one arm out to receive the rescued girl and putting the other hand to her belt. “How many? Jordan, cover me.”

Jordan is trying, but the deck immediately around them is suspiciously clear. It will be full in a moment, though, with the crew of the *Sankt Petyr* helping the rescued across. Why are they doing this in a group? Usually they cover only a few of their crewmates who are conducting the actual raid.

Behind her, she hears Nia say, “Too many. Packed in too tight, most of them sick. We need your help.”

“I need a line of sight on the crew. If someone gets hurt—” Another pistol shot cuts across Kaatje’s voice. Jordan still can’t see who’s firing. What if someone gets hurt while they stand here arguing?

“Go with them,” says Jordan, before taking the time to think about it. The results of this no-thinking strategy are mixed, but she can say that they’re never boring. “I can handle things topside.”

“I’m not leaving our crew without someone—” says Kaatje like she’s trying to be patient, like she’s talking to a child.

She is, but she’s talking to a child who found her sea legs before she learned to walk on land. Even if, despite learning some basic procedures over her various voyages with Inej, she knows relatively little about medicine. “I know enough. I’ll do it.”

Even Nia looks hesitant, but as more of their crewmates are starting to encircle them with the ill and injured, she just gives Kaatje a look, brows drawn close together. They need to get the rescued belowdecks before they get caught in the crossfire, Jordan knows.

Kaatje is busy looking at Jordan like she just suggested to throw Inej overboard. “You’re not a medik.”

“I’ve watched you. A few times.” Jordan holds out a hand for the toolbelt. “If it comes to it, I’ll just make sure no one gets hurt in the first place.”

Kaatje hesitates, looking across to the spreading battle, but Jordan sees her place a hand on the roll of bandages at her hip and knows that she’s won. “Any failure is on your conscience,” she says, and with that cheerful bit of motivation, she unclips the belt and hands the essentials over.

Jordan wastes no more time and takes off running across the deck, towards the heat of the action. She’ll be no use if someone is bleeding out and she’s on the wrong ship. She catches hold of one of the lines and leaps from the railing, swinging across to the *Wandering Heart* , effectively flinging herself into the thick of the battle—just the way she likes it.

There! She can finally see the owner of the pistol, and it’s not just the one that has it drawn—she spots two other slavers with an oily gleam at their belts. She doesn’t see Inej anywhere, but that probably means that she’s helping to ferry captives out of the hold.

Sinyen is holding her own with her dual blades up towards the bow, so at least their first mate is still intact. If Jordan gets lucky, everyone will be. But *everyone* has to include her, which means she needs to keep her head on, which she is reminded of when one of the slavers swings at her. He has a long cutlass that wants sharpening, but Jordan has an uncanny ability to dodge. She toys with the idea of dancing around him in a way that might get him to slice himself, but it’s more straightforward to stick a knife in his side, pull it out, and keep moving. He should at least stay down after that one.

He might bleed out. Jordan is aware of this possibility. Her parents have made it no secret to her that, despite the measures they’ve taken, there may come a point where the choice is to take a life or to give up her own, and while her stomach twists at the idea, Jordan knows not to put herself in danger to avoid it.

Speaking of putting herself in danger, she realizes as she darts between the combatants, she might've just set Kaatje up to get a serious talking-to from Inej. Not to mention herself. But it was that or leave the crew without quick access to any kind of medical help, so—

Someone grabs the back of Jordan's shirt. She squirms, but the man is bigger than she is, and for a second her thoughts go sideways with panic. She hasn't thought about getting taken in a long time, about being nine in the hold of a ship, but she feels just as small in this second as she did then.

"This one might make a nice trade," he says, his voice rough—but it's a smoker's rasp, not like her da at all. *A trade for their captives,* Jordan realizes. *For the one's we're taking from them.* The deal is the deal, she thinks hazily. She still remembers their voices.

"I'll bet this one grows up nice. Flat as a pan, but she's got a pretty face."

"Too young for my taste. Give her a few years."

What she doesn't remember is the right places to cut, to kick, the things that have been drilled into her for almost her entire life.

But then there's a *thunk* , and the man tips forward, and Jordan darts out of the way, and when he falls, Inej is standing behind him and there's a knife in the back of his neck.

Jordan gives a very shaky smile. "Not in the head?"

Inej doesn't look amused. "Why aren't you with Kaatje?"

"I am Kaatje. For now." Jordan gives a bored, flat expression. "How am I doing?"

" *Jordan.* "

"I'll explain later. I—" A cry of pain makes them both turn their heads toward the sound. Jordan whispers a prayer—mainly that she will be protected from the wrath of Captain Ghafa—and runs towards it.

It's astonishingly easy, small as she is, to slip between the cracks in the chaos. What's difficult is to figure out who was hurt, until she sees that Sinyen isn't alone, not exactly—there's a fallen form behind her, one that she is defending. *San.* Sinyen's younger sister, brought on later.

They're in front of some kind of quarters or office that sits beneath the forecastle deck, and San is sitting propped against the wall, one arm over her stomach. As Jordan creeps closer, she clocks the critical signs—blood seeping through her shirt, eyes half-shut, but still breathing.

"Can you stand?" she says softly, resting a hand on San's shoulder.

San opens her eyes a crack further. Instead of answering, she folds herself into a crouch and starts struggling to her feet with Jordan's help, keeping one arm folded firmly over her stomach.

Jordan shoulders open the door to the unfamiliar office, which is blessedly empty. *That could've been bad,* she reflects, but she doesn't like to waste too much time worrying about lost possibilities.

(Well. Mostly. The fact that she's got a namesake she'll never meet itches at the back of her mind when she lets it.)

The room is sparse—maps, a desk, a chair, piles of papers and rolled-up scrolls off to one side. Jordan almost entirely lifts San up to set her on the desk, then bolts the door and shoves the chair under its handle. She isn't sure that will stop any possible force from breaking in, but it's a pretty good place to start.

"Can I see?" Jordan asks before approaching San. That's another thing that she has learned like breathing since she was small—always ask first, before touching or getting close. Along with, of course, what to do if someone doesn't ask before touching her.

San, who has propped herself up on one elbow, exhales and gives a shaky nod. Her hair, usually parted in two slick-straight curtains around her face, now sticks to it with sweat. Jordan, having obtained permission, moves closer and undoes the belt that's slung over San's shoulder, then peels her shirt away from the wound; it's a relatively clean slice, though only in a sense of its shape—who knows what those blades might've been carrying, Jordan thinks. She wishes she had better supplies to wash it with.

Then again, Jordan has never been one to care for the way things were supposed to be done, and she isn't about to start now; her hands are almost flying as she cuts away the bloodied part of San's shirt and tears a dry strip from it, then douses it in the precious clean water from the flask on Kaatje's belt and wipes away the worst of the blood. Even though she's only seen Kaatje do this a handful of times, the rhythm of it feels *right* , like a dance her body knows without learning. Even when she knows the wound needs stitches, but she doesn't have the time or supplies; even when San gives a little hiss of pain with every touch that's somehow worse than a scream; even when she measures and cuts the bandages and prays that her handiwork holds; the rhythm doesn't break. It doesn't drag or rush or stop. It carries her through. It's like riding a wave.

It's like praying. That's just it, isn't it? It's not a dance or a wave or anything else. It's words no one has to teach her, an understanding between her and her Saints. Jordan isn't as faithful as her mama or as faithless as her da, but then again, the way they are with each other sometimes, she wonders if those descriptors could be switched. And she is whispering with every cut, touch, wrap, and tear, the same words she's spoken every night since they left Ketterdam, staying up wondering if she made the right choice or if she should have stayed behind and started building herself a real, solid life. *Guide me, guide me, guide me.*

She wonders if the Saints mind that she prays in Kerch.

Things have quieted out on the deck, and ironically, *that* is what breaks Jordan's focus with a spark of alarm. "They must have them all," she says. "We have to get out before they cut us loose." *And burn this ship,* she thinks. That is the Ghost Ship's way. They leave floating pyres behind as the only reminder of where they've been and what they do to those who cross them.

If anything, Jordan is half-carrying San even more than before, but there's an odd spark of exhilaration that comes with the challenge. San is older and taller, but Jordan has been made strong by the city and the seas, and she feels almost buoyant right now, floating on an answered prayer.

As she drags San across the deck, praying the dressing holds, the *Wandering Heart* lurches with the first volley of cannon fire—almost everyone is back on the *Sankt Petyr* , and now the other, better-armed Saints are doing their part. Jordan swears under her breath. Strength and prayers aside, she doesn't know how she's going to make it across with San like this.

"Jordan!"

She turns her head and spots Sinyen, also running for the railing, dodging the bodies of fallen slavers. Neither of them stop or properly turn, but they bend their courses towards one another to meet at the rail.

"Kaatje still needs to see her, but she'll be fine," Jordan says, with much more confidence than she feels. "As long as it doesn't get infected." *I hope.*

"Sinyen?" San asks quietly. The deck pitches again, and Jordan has to lurch into a wider stance to stay standing without San's weight pulling her down.

"Come here." To Jordan, Sinyen says, "Give her to me."

There are times to ignore the rules, but there are also times when Jordan has never been happier to follow orders. She shifts San's arm so that it now lies across Sinyen's shoulders, nods to the pair of them once, then grabs hold of the rail and launches herself over the side.

There's one heart-stopping moment when she doesn't catch the foothold of the grappling hook, and the sea yawns beneath, impatient to drag her down, but she gets ahold of one of the last uncut lines that connects the two ships. Despite the burning on her palms, she scrambles across it, wobbling with the slack, and sinks two of her knives into the side of the *Sankt Petyr* when she reaches it to use as climbing spikes. That can't be good for the blades, but they'll be no good to Jordan if they're sharp and she is drowning.

She drags herself onto the deck just in time to hear the solid *thunk* of Sinyen landing beside her. They don't share much acknowledgement; as the adrenaline drains, there are still lines to be cut, former prisoners to be attended to, and a slaver ship to burn. Jordan, for her part, heads belowdecks to find Kaatje, since it sounds like she's going to need an extra pair of hands. Jordan may be far from a proper medik, but she has a pair of hands that move like a prayer, and a heart that finally knows where it's aiming. That's got to be worth something.

Now the question is when to let it fly—and what it will strike when it does.

Chapter End Notes

disclaimer, I'm not an expert on half-trained emergency medicine, and I am even less of an expert on all things nautical. if my googling sessions were insufficient, and you *are* an expert in either of those areas and you'd like to help with future chapters or tell me what's wrong with this one, feel free to yell about it in the comments.

(also, yes, I realize that the *Wandering Heart* is sort of a fanciful name for what it is, but I got it from a random generator and couldn't resist the symbolism re: Jordan's internal journey. My plot is just several character development devices in a trench coat.)

pod link: https://open.spotify.com/episode/5IgZ0FiA3SOzE9Sntcy3XV?si=ezTtLy1tRwyUFiQRMGSQeQ

Inej/Jordan/Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej goes home. It's not the same.

Chapter Notes

so, as you may have noticed, dear readers, I'm trying a new thing and changing the post day to Fridays! that's one important bit of news; the other is that I have a tumblr now! I will post updates for this fic and my others, alongside general fandom-y stuff.

now, enjoy your early shout-outs~

jzmn8r, one of my favorite parts of this fic has been the opportunity to watch Jordan become her own person. I feel like a proud parent, documenting the process as she finds herself.

janejanajuno, I do love it when people point out their favorite quotes <3

gracieandtrees, I still don't understand how you read this whole fic in one day and am slightly concerned (but pleased).

always_reading, welcome to the fic! I hope you stay with us and enjoy the new chapters as well :)

brooklyns_here_1899, is that a newsies fan I see? also, thank you for your wonderfully thoughtful comment—and for noticing Jordan's hair! I was waiting for someone to pick up on that ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

During her years of travel, Inej has learned that every city has a voice.

She formed, tested, and confirmed this theory with a dedication and method that would make Kaz proud, and now she listens for it, wherever she goes. She knows the voice of Ketterdam as well as her husband’s coarse-stone rasp; regardless of which harbor one lands in, Ketterdam is brash and loud—harsh Kerch consonants clattering together, the voices of sailors and dockworkers, street vendors and musicians, tourists and conmen, all competing with one another like bidders at an auction.

Os Kervo is militant in comparison, a severe, restrained timbre. The *thunk* of heavy crates being stacked and the whir of ropes over pulleys is steady as a clock; the bells and coins jangling in the marketplace do so with the rhythm of a march; even the wind rises and falls to a steady beat. Inej, for her part, never adds to the voices. She does what she has always done—she keeps her silence, waiting for them to find discomfort in the empty space and give up their secrets to fill it.

Her crew has not learned the art of listening so well, especially when they are ready for their hard-earned shore leave. There remain a few, very literal, loose ends to tie up, and then the fleet of Saints will be dry-docked for a week while Inej and Jordan visit the caravan.

However impatient the crew may be, things seem to be going as planned at the docks, so Inej strolls a few yards away to get a better view of the marketplace, silent-footed out of habit. She is expecting to pick up two letters today; one will be from her parents, giving her the caravan's new location, sent by the usual methods. The other could be practically anywhere. She's tempted to check under the brim of her hat—there isn't much that she would put past Kaz by now.

One of the vendors, however, catches her eye. He's situated closer to the docks than most of the others, almost outside of the bounds of the marketplace, and his stall is not one of the permanent sort that can be rented for a fee; the legs are jointed and lightweight, the canopy filmy and held up by twig-thin rods. He also looks Suli, though as if he hasn't spent nearly as much time in the sun as Inej—who, admittedly, has been out in the open on the deck of her ship for weeks now.

He holds up a hand, and gold chains dangle from his fingers, glittering in the cold Ravkan sunlight. He makes a show of noticing her, and his showman's voice reminds her of the one her uncle used to put on when she was a child performing on the high wire. "Ah! Such a lovely lady as yourself, these would look pretty on you, very pretty, hm?"

Inej considers her roughened, calloused hands, her salt-crusted skin, her hair refusing to stay in a simple braid. *Lovely lady, indeed.* But what is it to be lovely, when the man she loves has called her *my piety and my punishment, my wisdom, my wraith, my keeper of secrets, the secret of my heart? My saint, my salvation, my destruction, my rebirth?* When he calls her his darling, his love? His reason?

For a moment, she wishes to be back at Thirteen Zelverstraat, to open the blue front door with a perfectly honest key, to see that smile in his eyes that never reaches his mouth as he says he taught her better. But there are twelve girls disembarking from her ship, blinking in the light, who will be taken home to their families today—who may never have seen those families again, if she'd stayed at home. Most of them will never have a Kaz. If the Saints have blessed her with one, then shouldn't Inej make the most of her freedom and become her own force of fate?

Her conscience is a misshapen thing, thin as a feather in some parts and unbreakably resolute in others, but it is formed that way because it's been made to be—through the fire, like a blade in the forge, quenched in the True Sea to make it hold its shape. This is one of the points on which it will not be broken, bent, or pierced.

The vendor is not giving up at her hesitance. He drapes an ear cuff with a thin gold chain over the back of his hand and turns it this way and that, showing off its shine. “For you,” he says, “A discount.”

Inej remembers the second letter she’s expecting. This seems impossibly convoluted. Nonetheless, she takes a few steps closer to the stand. “How much of a discount?”

She doesn’t like the vendor’s smile. He looks like someone who just heard their trap spring shut. “Five-finger discount.”

That expression is so wholly Kerch that it sounds odd when translated directly into Ravkan. A new word for this city’s voice to test out and probably dislike. But now Inej knows that she was right.

“You know,” she says, crossing the rest of the way to the jeweler’s cart, “that doesn’t usually mean giving something away.”

“I would never give this away,” the vendor replies, looking quite dramatically offended. “I am setting it here for a moment, with your receipt, while I calculate what you owe me. I may be looking away for a moment, however, for I am not strong with numbers.”

The “receipt” in question is in an envelope sealed with black wax. Inej is tempted to roll her eyes. Instead, she just picks it up along with the ear cuff, intending to write Kaz right back and remind him that she’s a much better thief than this whole production would imply.

She elects to read the letter once she and Jordan are safely on their way to join the caravan; for now, she tucks it into the small pouch that hangs from her belt and heads back to check on progress with the ships, as the jeweler gives a half-hearted protest behind her.

“Oh, I have been tricked! But such is the way with lovely ladies…”

Inej makes a mental note of a second thing to tell Kaz: whoever is writing these scripts, give the job to someone else.

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The trip to join the caravan is a short, if uncomfortable one; still, Inej is glad when she and Jordan are able to climb down from the cart and walk for the last small stretch of their journey. The earth underfoot feels, as usual, oddly stationary.

When seen from a distance, the caravan is suffused in soft light. Paper lanterns hang from the wagons, and it’s early dusk now, so the cookfires are burning too. It almost looks as if there’s a halo around it all, gently illuminating the wagons surrounded by deep gold grasses. Inej glances over at Jordan and sees the light reflected in her eyes.

“Are you excited, *meja?”* she asks with a small smile.

Despite the fact that she is Inej’s height now and will probably end up taller, Jordan skips a step to keep up with her. “Yeah! I just…hope they’re happy to see me, too. It’s been a while.”

She isn't wrong, Inej considers, as the grass they're walking through gets deeper. She and Jordan stopped by briefly to see her parents when Jordan was eight, during her longest and most disastrous absence from Ketterdam. Inej herself has visited the caravan since, inlcuding the celebration of her wedding where she danced in the heart-pounding, feet-aching way she hadn't since she was a child, but her family hasn't seen Jordan in seven, now almost eight years.

"They will be," she says. "You should have heard them the last time, begging me to bring you back." She will assure herself later. It's much like the protocol she has decided for if the ship ever goes down—save Jordan first, find her own way to stay afloat second. It doesn't matter how strong, how dangerous her daughter becomes; Inej will never be the one to fail to protect her. Never again.

Jordan picks a burr off of her leg. The grass is well past their knees by now. "Are there bugs in this?"

Inej's mouth tilts up at the corner. "There may be. But they won't hurt you." Her mama used to put strong-scented oils on her to keep them away, she remembers; she'd tried to squirm and get free, but she could be kept from the fields even less than she could be kept in her parents' arms, so she'd had to concede to the preparations in order to be allowed to play.

Sometimes, she wonders if they still see her that way—if they don't quite comprehend what they've lost. Do they still think they need to protect her, that they know more of the world than she does? Maybe that's the pressure that she feels when she's with them, seizing her chest, making her want to run and never stop until she finds her wings.

But she thinks again of what she decided about Jordan, that she will protect her daughter no matter how capable she is of protecting herself. Especially after she knows that she failed to, once before.

She wonders if, perhaps, she knows exactly how they feel.

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By the time they reach the encampment, Jordan's legs are covered with burrs and fuzzy golden heads from the thick autumn grasses. She's so busy brushing and picking them off that when she looks up, she's startled.

There's so much color, everywhere. The sky is darkening still, but by the lantern-light, every wagon is tasseled and draped in brilliantly dyed silks, and small fires whisper between them where the families are eating, all of them together clothed like a handful of jewels—ruby and sapphire and opal white, emerald and jade and tourmaline, embroidered in silver, bronze, and gold. Some of them have rings and ornaments in their brows, others in their noses; some have both, connected by a slender chain, all gold. Jordan and Inej have one each of those piercings, but neither of them has both, and suddenly she wishes to.

She wishes for a world where she could've had all of this. It's—it's not that she doesn't like her life as it has been, growing up between the city streets and the True Sea. If she'd been raised in a caravan, she wouldn't know how to fight or steal or climb a wall slick with rain.

But she *would* know the traditions of her people, their customs, festivals and holidays and food and clothes. Inej has done what she can to make sure Jordan remembers her Suli, and sometimes she'll bring back Suli food or little gifts from the market in Little Ravka, but she has lost some of her culture, too.

It's been a long time since Jordan has thought about her birth mother. Inej says that Jordan used to call her Mama One. That sounds like something Jordan would do. It's strange that Jordan doesn't really remember what she looked like, but she can guess from looking at herself—while she and Inej share the same long, gleaming dark hair and deep bronze skin, Jordan has a softer, more curving build, a narrower nose, and more deep-set eyes. They're the hallmarks of another life she could've had, and she doesn't like to think about it, because she doesn't want to be ungrateful or anything, but...she'll never know if it was worth the loss.

One of the wagons that doesn't have a cookfire nearby has a small group of people sitting in front of it, mostly hidden by a circle of shadow. When one of them stands, however, with the endlessly patient slowness that old women do, Jordan recognizes her *nani.*

"Mama!" Inej doesn't run forward, but she does walk to meet her mother, and Jordan follows. If she's walking a little more slowly, well, nobody has to notice.

She hangs back during all of the hugging; it makes her feel sort of itchy and impatient, but she can wait to be noticed. She'd rather wait, she thinks, unsure of what they will see when they look at her. A long-lost granddaughter? A wild, unchecked girl with a knife up her sleeve? An imposter in a world that should be hers but isn't?

Her *nani* pulls away from Inej, and Jordan braces herself, but she only takes Jordan by the shoulders and holds her back to look at her, eyes glossy in the firelight with unshed tears. "Beautiful," she murmurs, and presses her lips together as if to keep from crying.

Well. Now Jordan's eyes are stinging too, and she doesn't really know why.

She was never necessarily taught to control or suppress her feelings, but she did learn by watching, and she makes use of it now, composing herself enough to greet her *nani* in her best Suli. "Hello, *nani.*"

"Where's Papa?" Inej questions. Jordan wonders if she knows that she's standing up straighter than she was before.

Her *nani* turns her face away, towards the wagon. "Inside," she says quietly. "He is…not feeling well."

Jordan looks to Inej out of habit, but finds her staring into nothing, letting out a quiet exhale. "For how long?"

"He fell ill after I sent your letter," says Jordan's *nani* , her voice shaky, like a high wire strung too loose. She curls her hands into the fabric of the scarf draped over her hair. "It will be good for him to see you."

As they step up and in to the wagon, Jordan moves to be beside Inej, holding her arm in a gentle grip. She doesn't know which of them needs the other to lean on more, but it almost doesn't matter as long as they stay together.

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Once they've ducked under the carefully draped silks that hang over the arch-shaped door, Inej is almost surprised by how bright it is inside. The space is small enough to be lit by a few lanterns, but the tops of the walls are lined with them, and they cast a soft glow over the intricate decorations that are etched into the walls and floor.

She is reminded of the belief that light can have healing properties; once an ancient custom, having almost died out, it was revived thanks to Sankta Alina. Out of habit, she rests her hand on the knife of the same name and prays—a thanks that her papa survived long enough for her to see him, and a plea for him to survive longer yet.

He stirs on the raised bed in the back of the *vardo,* where he is surrounded by tasseled and embroidered pillows—Inej thinks that she recognizes her mother's handcraft on some of them. "Inej?"

Her mama goes to his side first. "She is here, *ljubavi.* And she brought our Jordan." The Kerch "J" is hard for both of her parents to pronounce, making Jordan's name softer when they say it.

Inej joins her mama by the raised bed. "Hello, Papa." Her voice sounds small to her ears. But she always feels smaller when she is with them.

He turns his face to her, and his eyes crinkle at the corners in a smile. Inej swallows her surprise at how… *old* he looks. It's been barely a year since he was dancing around the fire with her and everyone else, twirling her like she was a little girl again. Now his face is hollow, his hair mostly white. She swallows the lump in her throat, but it seems to get stuck, heavy as a stone, somewhere behind her sternum.

"I knew I would see you again," he says. His voice is hoarse and rough, Kaz's if it were sliced paper-thin. "We prayed for your safe return."

Inej bends to let kim kiss her forehead, grateful for the excuse to close her eyes. "And we'll be here for a while yet," she promises when she draws back, but the heaviness in her chest refuses to fade.

Jordan creeps hesitantly up to her side. "Hi," she says. Inej rests a hand on her shoulder, drawing her just slightly closer, and feels Jordan lean against her.

Her papa struggles into a sitting position, and her mama quickly swoops in to help, tucking pillows around him to prop him up. He extends a hand, but Inej doesn't push Jordan forward; she lets her daughter step up of her own accord.

Jordan does, and her papa gently cups Jordan's face. "Grown up before we even knew it," he says, and there's a shine in his eyes that the lanterns can't explain away. "Just like our Inej."

Inej meets this like a wobble on the wire, like an unexpected gust of wind; she centers herself and breathes. In, out. It doesn't dislodge the weight in her chest, but it does keep her from falling.

"Ah! That reminds me," her mother says with false cheeriness, "there are people who will want to greet you."

Inej wonders why they wouldn't want her and Jordan to stay, to make use of every moment that they have. But how can she refuse her parents anything, when she came so close to never seeing them again? When she continues to build her life and raise her daughter half a world away? When her papa might have died without her being there? She is here, of course, but it's a near thing. One storm, one change in the wind, could have made all the difference.

"Of course," she says, inclining her head—the sign of respect owed by a child, not the grown woman that she is. But it's an old habit.

She won't force Jordan to come with her. This is her choice to make. But as she steps down out of the *vardo* , she hears Jordan follow.

They are quiet as they walk through the encampment. Inej feels as if she's doing a poor job of being a mother, not saying anything to comfort Jordan or explain what they're seeing, or even to ask what she thinks or feels. But silence has always been her comfort, her armor, the thing she draws around herself when she feels exposed and can't face the threat.

She doesn't think she's angry. Who would she be angry with, if she was? Herself? It's just—another loss. Another thing that fell through the cracks as she tried to live two lives. She isn't angry, she realizes; she's tired, a bone-deep weariness that she doesn't have the strength to shake. The world needs the kind of monster that she is. The boys and girls like her, they need her. But why can't she seem to be the kind of monster that Kaz is—the kind who can come home at night and kiss her gently, sweetly, who dares to see a world where they're not always fearing for one another's lives? Whatever he's said about hope, he had enough of it to ask the question in the first place.

When everyone thinks you're a monster, you needn't waste your time doing every monstrous thing. Pekka Rollins has stayed out of Ketterdam and away from her daughter, not because Inej continues to hurt him, but because she cut him once, sixteen years ago, and made a promise of the next cut that he couldn't doubt.

How long will the legend of the Ghost Ship carry on, even after the ship itself rests in the harbor? Would it be enough?

She is startled from her thoughts when a young man rises from the side of one of the cookfires and steps into their path. He reminds her of Bajan, somewhat—the same thick curls of hair to his collar, the same self-assured grin.

"My name is Stefan Yadav," he says, genuflecting slightly, and Inej realizes that he is addressing his greeting to Jordan. "I'm only passing through, but it's a pleasure to meet you."

He isn’t exactly ignoring Inej, but his body is turned slightly towards Jordan, and his eyes are focused on her face. Inej knows the look of a man who wants something, and he may really just be a boy, close enough to her daughter’s age, but that doesn’t stop her from resting a hand on the knife at her belt.

“Oh,” says Jordan. She looks up at Inej, a clear question written on her face. “Um…nice to meet you too.”

"Jordan, yes?" Stefan pronounces her name without issue. He holds out a hand, but when Jordan doesn't take it, he withdraws it smoothly to his side. "Forgive me. I don't mean to intrude. I only wanted to introduce myself."

"Right," Jordan says slowly. "I mean—yes, that's my name. So." She doesn't shoot Inej another sideways glance, but there is a curious uptick in her voice regardless.

Stefan seems unbothered by her hesitance. “I look forward to talking more during your time here. The Ghafas are wonderful people, and they speak highly of you—both.” He adds this last as a clear afterthought before giving another slight bow and heading back to his seat.

Inej watches him go; Jordan is the first of them to start walking again, towards the temporary *vardo* that has been set up for the two of them to share. “That was weird,” she comments.

Inej looks back over her shoulder to where Stefan is sitting, laughing with some of her cousins. He said he was visiting. But what for? There are no major festivals approaching, and they haven’t camped near another caravan. He said her parents had spoken highly of Jordan.

Did they…bring a man here to court her daughter?

Inej would like to believe that they wouldn’t. But while thinking about marriage at not yet sixteen would be an insanity to Jordan, it’s part of the old ways, the culture that ensured close family bonds and the carrying on of tradition. But even still, given Jordan’s age, Stefan would have to court her for several years before anything could be formalized.

Once, when there seemed to be no place for a child in Inej’s life, her parents had expected to raise Jordan. Is this all just a ploy to keep her?

“You don’t have to talk to him if you don’t want to,” says Inej, surprising herself with the cutting edge of her voice. They’ve reached the *vardo* by now, and she leads the way inside.

“I know,” says Jordan, following her in and shutting the door. “I don’t want to. I’m…” She sits on the floor, on one of the many tasseled cushions near the front of the wagon, and wraps the end of her braid around her finger. “I talked to Alby before we left.”

Inej sighs quietly and abandons her inspection of the raised bed, going instead to sit beside Jordan. “I know.”

“You do?”

“I pay attention, *meja* . You were late to meet us and smiling more than you ever do, so early in the morning.” It was her job for so long to gather secrets that it’s almost an unconscious

practice now.

“Well…” Jordan blows out a nervous breath. “We’re together now. I mean, we talked about it. And I know you and Kaz didn’t—that you never really did that, and I kind of wish we could just *know* the way you do, but…” She runs her hands over her knees, looking everywhere but at Inej.

How strange, that Jordan sees it as a blessing for them to leave so many things undefined. How strange, that she thinks they ever understood what they were. “We didn’t just know, *meja* ,” she says. “We learned. You remember our life before he chose to be part of it. For a long time, I didn’t know if he ever would.”

“So…” At last, Jordan meets her gaze, her brown eyes wide in the lantern-light. “You’re not mad?”

Inej thinks again of Pekka Rollins, on that night sixteen years ago. She thinks of seeing his face white with fear, and of promising every monstrous thing. “No, *meja* ,” she says, slipping an arm around Jordan’s back. Jordan drops her head onto Inej’s shoulder. Somewhere outside, a cricket sings. “No. I’m not.”

Chapter End Notes

this chapter forced me to do the thing that scares me and make up some fantasy language words. my Suli is a combination of Hindi, Croatian, and Romanian terms, hence *nani* (Hindi for maternal grandmother), *vardo* (a Romani term for their wagons), and *ljubavi* (Serbian/Croatian, "love/my love"). I am but a humble author with a keyboard and a dream, so if any of these are wrong, please let me know.

Inej

Chapter Summary

As the sun rises, Inej talks to her mother and tries to find a place to land.

Chapter Notes

If there's one thing we learn from this fic, it's that family feels are awfully complicated. Now that I have you all properly nervous, time for shout-outs~

alwaysreading, thanks for your comment! Don't worry, Stefan doesn't really have a chance, lol.

Not another confused platypus!, I'm glad I was able to master the weird vibes from just that conversation.

SilvervFirefly, reunions are often bittersweet and rarely simple, especially when you have to have many of them.

thephonyqueenofengland, I think Kaz and Inej are having fun with their outlandish ways of sending these letters.

JustaBoredFrog, I am very proud to have made the people around you think you're crazy, lol.

Bisexual_Pretzel, Alby is holding up as well as one can expect with Jordan being gone—which is to say, he handles the absence of his gf about as well as Kaz does. Minus the murder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the early hours of the morning, before even Jordan is awake, Inej walks. She can’t sleep late in the caravan anymore.

She leaves the encampment behind and wanders—no set destination, no path to get there. Or, at least, she doesn’t mean to have a path; and yet, she finds herself carving the same winding way through the sweet autumn grasses even so. The feeling that draws her onward, like a hook sunk into her chest, is familiar, and yet unlike every time before, it leads nowhere. It simply drops away, leaving her stranded.

Aim is a choice she must make for herself. Inej knows that much. Her Saints will guide her steps; she believes that as firmly as she always has; but they don't control her. No one does. And that is exactly what she wanted, isn't it? To stand at the helm of her own life, to take freedom in her hands and cling to it until her palms split and bleed when the storms come. How else can she feel like it's rightfully hers?

But now she has no map, no stars to guide her. She has Kaz, back in Ketterdam, understanding and wanting things that he can't or won't tell her; she has Jordan, less sure of where she wants to go than Inej herself; she has her parents, but for how much longer? All that's left is her own heart, a compass spinning out of control.

This morning, she climbs a shallow hill in the trail of yesterday's footsteps and stands at the top, under a solitary, weathered oak tree. Clutching a mug of spiced tea, she looks east, towards the sunrise, and thinks of mornings like this, years ago. She thinks of the farmhouse, of Jordan when she was smaller, less complicated, and of Kaz—freckled, tanned, soft around the edges. Will she ever stop looking back and realizing how *young* they were? Taking on the world at seventeen on a chance—and winning. Nineteen, raising a child, loving each other so fiercely that they didn't even understand it.

Even now, she feels impossibly unqualified for the job of being a mother. When Inej was Jordan's age, she was scaling buildings and hiding in vents, lying beside Kaz on stakeouts and learning to take lives. She was a world away from any guidance her mother could have given her. So what is she meant to say to Jordan now?

Any answer will have to wait until Jordan herself wakes up, which leaves the morning to stretch long before her. She could sit here—rest in one of the nooks framed by the roots of the tree. But she doesn't have that kind of stillness inside her now. She fears that as soon as she tries to settle, she won't be able to stay.

Instead, she remains standing, and with her free hand she withdraws Kaz's letter from the pouch at her side. The ear cuff slips out of the folds of the envelope; she turns it back and forth in her palm, studying it in the dim blue morning, and then slips it back into the pouch for later. Then she turns her attention to the letter.

It is written in invisible ink, as is Kaz's way, so yesterday she'd set it over one of the lanterns and let the heat reveal the words. Only now, however, is she actually reading them.

The back of it reads only: *For you. Never something for nothing, but the only price I ask is that you would come home and wear it for me.*

Inej draws her thumb along the edge of the paper, her heart feeling grasped by a fist. Part of her wants to go now, to take Jordan and book the first ship back to Ketterdam, to be anchored in his arms and leave all of this behind. But she refuses to be halfway across the ocean when her father dies.

Gently, as gently as she would touch Kaz himself, she turns the paper over to read the body of the letter. It's mostly what she has become used to—tips about the habits and whereabouts of slavers, bounty hunters along her route who might give up information, and the usual scattering of crossed-out words and lines that Inej will enjoy drawing out of him upon her

return. He tells her, quite smugly, that some of his new recruits soundly beat a handful of Liddies in a border scuffle, and updates her on the training and antics of the little spiders (*Elsje was telling the story of me ousting the old man the other day. Where she heard it from, I have yet to find out, but in her version I slaughter three men in a single blow. I don't believe my memory has gotten* that *bad.)*

The postscript reads- *Tell your parents I said "zdravo ." You will pronounce it better than I could.*

Inej reads it all, and holds onto the letter tighter than is strictly necessary, and the ground feels solid and steady beneath her for the first time since they made port. Before her, the gray dawn sky has drawn back like a curtain, revealing the pale pink of a Ravkan sunrise. Then it's just Inej and the tree beside her, Inej and her silence, until a third shadow joins them on the hill.

"Mama," she says quietly. She hasn't been avoiding her mother, exactly, but she hasn't been seeking her out, either.

"I'm surprised you're awake," her mama replies. Not really an answer, but Inej suspects it's going to be an entry point to the conversation they haven't been having. She's played the game with Kaz enough—saying things by saying something else, or by saying nothing at all—and she knows all the tricks.

"I wanted to see the sun come up," Inej says quietly. "It's different every place we go. And it's never like this in Ketterdam. Between the smoke and the city lights…" This is mostly the truth. But she also hasn't been able to sleep in any of the times she's come home, not since that lazy morning so many years ago.

"Then why do you stay, *meja?* " Her mother's voice is plaintive, almost pleading. Inej doesn't look at her. She can't.

"You know why I stay."

"Then bring them here. They are not your only family, Inej." This is the woman who taught Inej the skill of choosing her words; Inej understands the implications, and knows it would be easier if she could pretend she doesn't. There have been little mentions in her parents' letters to her, offhand comments—wishes to see her more often, wonderings about how much Jordan has grown, and the like. They trusted her enough to bless her choice in men, especially since Kaz was the one to bring Inej back to them, but she's noticed that they have hardly mentioned him since she arrived. Perhaps now, they see him not as the man who brought her back, but as the one keeping her away.

Looking over the landscape of burnt gold, ochre, and dusty browns, Inej finds herself thinking of Lij, of visiting the farmhouse with Kaz, of the world being startlingly green. She's home, and yet the memories she's having are of everywhere but here.

She knows that her mama is attuned to her silence. Who, after all, taught her the art?

“Inej,” she says, “we did not just lose you once. Since that day, we have lost you a thousand times.”

Inej wants to shut her eyes against this feeling, or maybe to run down the hill and never stop. She wants to hide. She wants to disappear. But she knows that if she did, her mother would be counting— *a thousand and one.*

So she doesn’t run. She just steps away, scouting out the topic, casing it like a manor house, summoning her nerve and a plan to break in later. “Mama, why did you bring that man here? Stefan?”

“He is only a boy,” her mother says. Avoidance upon avoidance. They’re too alike. “He is visiting.”

“He said you talked to him. That you’d spoken highly of Jordan.” Inej is fighting to keep the accusation from her voice—it feels bitter and unfamiliar, a thorn taking root in her chest—but she knows what she is. She may even still seek the best in people, but Ketterdam taught her to expect the worst.

“We talk to our visitors,” her mother says levelly—too much so. The stability is false. Her chin is lifted a bit too high. “ *Meja,* why are you asking me this?”

Maybe she *is* paranoid, Inej thinks. Maybe she has leapt much too far, and there is nothing to catch her. “Because I think he means to court Jordan. And I want to know if that’s what you’re intending, too.”

She half-expects her mother to be angry, defensive, but she isn’t. She folds her hands in front of her, dark eyes cast in the pastel light of the dawn. “Perhaps you don’t see her, *meja,* but I do. I see the sadness in her smile when she eats by our fires. I see the unsteadiness in her step when she climbs into your *vardo.* I see her trying on my gold—my chains, my rings. I let her.”

The thorny thing in Inej’s chest sinks its roots deeper. Her spiced tea has gone cold in her hand. “You believe she wouldn’t tell me if she wanted to stay?” *Do you, Inej? Do you believe she would?*

She can’t tell who the voice in her thoughts belongs to. It doesn’t call her *little lynx,* but it still sounds like Tante Heleen.

“Perhaps even she doesn’t know,” her mother says, frighteningly placid. Everything about her is calm and unstirred—soft hands, smooth silks draped along simple lines, not a single hair escaping her braid.

Inej feels herself unraveling. She will never be the woman her mother is. She lost her chance to be the daughter they wanted a long time ago. That girl died in the hold of a slaver ship. They’re left with the one who survived. “You cannot make that choice for her,” she says, staring straight ahead.

Her mother hums gently. Everything about her is soft and quiet. Inej is a creature of silence, but in this very second she wants to scream. “Neither can you, *meja.* ”

Inej exhales. Her eyes are stinging and she doesn’t know why. “You can’t make that choice for me, either.”

Her mother is silent. It is a silence Inej knows well. It pokes and it pulls. But she remains still, letting the cool morning air move around her, letting the silence wear itself out. She can wait.

“Your father thought he would not live to see you say goodbye, Inej.” Suddenly her mother’s voice is no longer soft, and Inej knows that she fell for her own trick; she wasn’t prepared for the cut. “I cannot choose for you to stay. But if I could, I would, and I would not regret it.”

Maybe Inej should feel trapped by those words. Maybe something within her should rebel, should want to flee into the rolling golden grasses, at the thought of someone controlling her again. But she just feels empty.

“You can’t keep me, Mama,” she says quietly. Her hand goes to the ring on its chain around her neck, and it is cold to the touch. “No one can. Kaz has tried. Even Heleen—”

Her mother spits out a curse. “I will *never* be like that—”

Inej’s heart is collapsing in on itself, dragging her lungs down with it. It’s suddenly so hard to breathe. She’s never minded small spaces, but this interpersonal kind of claustrophobia is unbearable. “You won’t. Which is why you can’t keep me. Heleen put chains on me. She put bells on my ankles so that she could hear me move. And still she lost me.”

Her mother rests a hand on the trunk of the tree. Inej sees her hand curl against the bark. Her voice rises in a plaintive melody, like a grieving song, like she’s mourning something she hasn’t yet lost. Or maybe she has. “But what have I done to make you run, *meja?* ”

Inej thinks of Stefan and the things that have gone unsaid about that. She thinks of saying *you didn't hold on tight enough.* She thinks of saying, *you held on too tight.* But that isn’t really it, not now, with the sun rising before them and an invisible chasm in between. “You sent me searching for my wings.”

She hears her mother’s breath rise and fall in the stillness of the morning, and for a moment she’s a child again, curled between her parents as she sleeps off a nightmare, trying to match the patterns of their breathing. This time, she can’t seem to make them line up.

Inej looks sideways at her mother, and the expression she finds there is startlingly familiar. She used to think of her mama’s face as her own, but more open, less complicated, unmarred by doubt and danger; now, they are just the same. They both look so tired. Inej doesn’t need to see her own face to know that her weariness shows.

“Did you find them?” her mama says at last.

Inej thinks of her ship, of the places she's been; of Thirteen Zelverstraat and Kaz at his desk, eyes tracing her face, hands bare; of Jordan, following her as if *she* knows where she's going; of the verdant fields of Lij and the Ravkan sunrise. Home, she remembers, is not a place to stay. It's a place to return to.

She loops an arm through her mother's and rests her head on her mama's shoulder. "I have, Mama," she says quietly. "I have." Her wings are not ephemeral things of pearl and clouds. They are black, tattered and scarred. But given the choice between the two, now, she'd rather have the wings of a crow.

Chapter End Notes

zdravo- "hello" in my version of Suli, which in this case is Croatian/Serbian.

please comment! I love this story dearly, but the feedback certainly helps with motivation :)

you can find me on tumblr and instagram :)

Jordan/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan makes a friend. Kaz says the only kind of prayer that he can.

Chapter Notes

I just realized when posting this that this fic's second anniversary passed while I was on break. so—happy belated birthday, fic! (and to all of you who've become part of the family). speaking of all of you, it's time for shout-outs~ (these will be for the last proper chapter as well as my author's note, which I plan to delete.)

Andhehe, I really appreciate your assurance <3

simpforjames potter, it's great to be back!

Lunarmoo, I am such a sucker for character development (clearly).

SilvervFirefly, family tends to be all about making the hard choices. And the unfortunate truth is that when a life has been split, it can't ever quite be the same as before.

eekabee, fear not, Stefan is just as complicated as everything else about this conversation.

Andhehe, I do love to sit in some uncomfortable feelings. My characters probably don't, but it's the best way for them to grow.

Bisexual_Pretzel, fear not, you will be seeing Kaz (and maybe Alby) again very soon—check the chapter title!

jzmn8r, and this fic loves you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually, Jordan goes to talk to Stefan.

She finds him with some of the cousins—that's all that she knows to call them, "the cousins". The Suli don't have second cousins or cousins once-removed like the Kerch do. Wylan has told her that the Kerch like to be exact about these things in order to trace inheritances, but Jordan has learned that for the Suli, the naming stops at "cousin" and extends to practically anyone that the family likes enough to adopt.

All of them are in more casual day clothes, plain colors and hand-spun fabrics, simple embroidery and single scarves instead of many; they've just brought back firewood from the forest that the caravan has camped beside. They're lounging on a fallen tree, laughing as they compare calluses, loudly complaining, their stories and voices competing. Stefan has wood chips in his hair.

Jordan being the way that she is, they don't see her until precisely when she wants them to.

However, as soon as they do, their voices vanish, as if stolen by a master thief.

"Not all at once," she says drily. At least they have the good grace to look embarrassed.

Teo, one of the youngest, is first to speak up. "I should take this home," he says, gathering up an armful of logs. "We need a new cookfire."

A stream of excuses follows from the others, as if poured from a bottle, and they all wander off towards the caravan until only Jordan and Stefan are left. He stays seated on the fallen tree, reclined against a branch.

"That branch is probably rotten," says Jordan.

Stefan looks at her for a moment. The light from the canopy is dappled and murky, and it deepens his pronounced features. This does not help Jordan read his expression. "You've been avoiding me."

"You've noticed," Jordan agrees. Why should she deny it? That isn't what she's here for. The faster they can get it out of the way, the better.

Stefan exhales and looks away. The shade falls like a curtain over his face. "I'm sorry about your grandfather."

Jordan shrugs, arms lax at her sides. "Save that for when we lose him."

She sees the frown that creases Stefan's brow beneath his gleaming curls before he clears it away. "You would do better to say *if* ."

Maybe what she wants to ask him is pointless, Jordan thinks. Again and again, she is reminded that she's a stranger in her homeland. She is far too practical to belong here. She doesn't look Kerch and she doesn't act Suli, so how is she supposed to belong anywhere? Jordan isn't sure that she likes the idea of *belonging* —after all, a belonging is something that is owned, a possession, and she isn't about to give herself away to any person or place.

But…even the outcasts are cast out from somewhere. Jordan has lost sight of where she started.

So how is she meant to know where she's going?

Well, she won't find out by being untrue to who she is. "I would do better, probably," she agrees. "But if being better means being good, I don't want it. I'm not good."

She feels Stefan's gaze return to her. He seems so comfortable with meeting her eyes. Does he ever blink? "Come," he says. "Sit."

Jordan gave up hesitating a long time ago; she just decides and then moves. The thin coating of fir needles on the forest floor remains silent and undisturbed beneath her steps. Stefan offers her a hand up, but she ignores it and hops up onto the fallen tree by herself.

She sits beside him. The bark is rough through her quilted breeches. Neither one of them says anything.

Stefan straightens up from his lounging position, then reaches into his vest and pulls out a slab of chocolate—imperfect in shape, wrapped in thin paper, clearly homemade. He snaps off a corner and hands it to Jordan.

She takes it and turns it back and forth. "You're not going to poison me, are you?"

By way of an answer, Stefan bites a piece off of the bar, chews, and swallows.

"You could've made yourself immune," says Jordan, but she eats the chocolate anyway. It's perfectly bitter, spiced with the same mix as her *nani'* s tea. Maybe if she'd grown up here, she would know the spices by name.

"Dare I ask," says Stefan, "Why the change of heart?"

It's funny to Jordan that this idiom is roughly the same in Suli and Kerch, especially considering that most Kerch turns of phrase have to do with either farming or trade. They generally don't like talking about their hearts. "I haven't changed anything, not really," she says, swinging her legs, kicking the side of the log in a heartbeat rhythm. "I still don't want to marry you."

Stefan's eyebrows go up. "I don't believe I asked you to. You're very forward, you know."

"Usually, the forward thing would be to say that I *did* want to marry you," Jordan comments. "And you didn't have to. I can read between the lines. My family wants me to stay, and they think that the perfect lure to tempt a teenage girl would be a handsome boy."

Stefan smirks slightly. "You think I'm handsome?"

Jordan waves her hand in a frustrated gesture. "For one thing, you don't need me to tell you that you've got a nice face. You can go look in a puddle for that."

Stefan opens his mouth as if to interject, but Jordan points at him quite sternly and he shushes. "For another, that's exactly my point. It's not nearly as important as people think. Or as they think it should be. Am I making any sense?"

"Very little," Stefan says with a shrug. "But I like listening to you. It's entertaining."

Jordan kicks the log they're sitting on. "Don't listen because it's fun. Listen because this matters. There are loads of things I want more than to get married. I have a list long enough to wrap around your *vardo*. But one of the things I want is to know what it's like."

“It?” Stefan’s posture is different now. The joking air is gone from him. He shifts position on the fallen tree to face her, and Jordan is gratified to see real interest in his face. “What does that mean?”

“To—” Jordan holds her hands up and lets them fall, searching for the right words. Her first language has been coming back to her with relative ease, but it makes some things so hard to say. They have to be approached around the edges, or said with all these unnecessary twists and turns and explanations. It’s nearly impossible to be straightforward. “To be born here and grow up here. To know the steps to all the dances. To dress in silks without needing help with all the folding and tying. To say things in the right way instead of being too practical, and too forward, and uncaring, and…” She picks a piece of bark off of the weathered trunk beside her, hoping that she’ll think of something else to say, but the words won’t seem to come.

Jordan doesn’t give up. It’s a policy that she abandoned along with hesitating. But she certainly feels like she just did.

From the distant shape of the caravan, she can hear snatches of conversation—mothers scolding wayward children, old women complaining from the steps of their wagons, and the cousins, still laughing and telling their stories. The words are fragmented by the wind, and Jordan can’t understand any of it.

“I’ve never left Ravka,” Stefan says softly. He traces the pattern of the tree’s bark with one fingertip, his eyes following the lines. “There are parts of this country I have never seen. I live with a family that has known me since I was young, and when I marry a nice girl one day, they will tease me with stories of my learning to walk, and dance, and dress myself. I will carry on my family name and give my parents grandchildren, and one day I will grow old and tease them from the door of my *vardo* with the same stories. I’ll have no new ones to tell.” The tracing stops.

Jordan is silent for a moment. It is, for her, a long silence. “It’s just as well that I said no to you. I’m not a nice girl.”

“No,” says Stefan, and he’s not looking at her anymore; his gaze is on the sky somewhere past them both, almost plaintive with longing. “You’re not.”

Jordan barely knows what she wants to study, and here they would have her thinking about marriage, maybe children someday. But she didn’t even have a family name until she was fourteen. She still thinks of it as a gift, and isn’t sure what Kaz would want for her to do with it. For that matter, she’s not sure what *she* wants to do with it.

She doesn’t bother trying *Rollins* on for size. Even with the pieces of the story that she’s missing, Jordan knows that to replace the name she was given with that one would be, to Kaz, like a slap in the face. Probably worse; he can take a blow. She doesn’t like to think of how he might take that.

There might not even be a point in wondering. Alby’s been writing to her, but he keeps saying that his father wants him to come home, that every letter is just another warning about the dangers of Ketterdam. Maybe he’ll give in. Or maybe his father will decide not to give him the choice. Jordan would like to think that she can believe the things he says, that he

really would defy even his da to be with her, but his da is familiar and stable, and Jordan is… not.

Jordan is his girlfriend, technically, who sprang that fact on him right before setting off to sail around the world.

“At least you’ve got all of that laid out for you,” she says quietly, looking down at her lap. Jordan is as independent as either of her parents and twice as stubborn. She’s never wanted to have a choice made for her. But right now, the idea doesn’t seem so bad.

“I disagree,” says Stefan, and upon closer inspection, his smile isn’t a smile at all. It’s shaped like one, but it’s all sadness. “I’d rather have the choice.”

Jordan laughs, but it isn’t a laugh any more than his smile is a smile. “Want to trade?”

“I’ve heard that is what the Kerch do,” Stefan replies. His eyes are almost transparent in the sunlight, but it’s not any clearer what lies behind them.

“Then…let’s not, for today.” Jordan draws her braid over her shoulder, wraps it back and forth around her hand. She’s always the one with too much to say, but right now, all that’s inside her refuses to order itself into words.

She wonders if Alby would understand it—if he tries to teach himself Kaelish folktales from library books, or searches the city for stalls and carts that sell the food he should’ve grown up eating. Maybe he wouldn’t, hasn’t. Maybe he would just be tired of waiting for Jordan to find her way. But…when they first met, she was lost, and he drew her a map. He told her how to find him again. He’s been the first on board with her wildest schemes and the last to let her down.

Plus, if she could just explain herself to Stefan, she might’ve just made a friend who could help, too.

Well, she’s done enough giving up for one day. She’ll cling to trust and hope like a line slick with ocean spray, like a rope on her mama’s ship that burns her hands but holds her fast when the storms rise. If the ship goes down, she’ll go down with it, but she’s finding that she isn’t afraid.

“I can still teach you to dance, if you want.” Stefan’s voice interrupts the silence from beside her.

Jordan looks towards him, slowly. Maybe not everything has to be decisive or immediate. She allows herself a breath before she answers. “Sure. And I’ll give you new stories to tell.”

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The trick to a good disguise is to not make it look like one.

While Kaz has access to or possession of possibly every uniform in the city, plus storehouses full of costumes and various accessories, his most faithful disguise is amusingly simple and housed in his own closet: a wool coat, heavy and high-collared, a navy that’s almost gray,

paired with a rough-carved wooden walking stick, a worn scarf, and a hat that casts a shadow over his eyes. It used to include a pair of dusty brown work gloves as well, but he's been finding in more recent years that it better hides his identity to venture out sans gloves.

The irony in this has not lost its sting.

While his reputation serves and protects him for the most part, there are times he prefers to discard it—namely, where anything behind the walls of Thirteen Zelverstraat is concerned. His mission today, he thinks as he walks alongside the Beurscanal, would be laughable to his younger self; he's still slightly incredulous, now, at the fact that he's taking time out of his day to do it.

He almost feels the need to console himself that he isn't becoming superstitious; it would somehow be a more acceptable reasoning to say that he's just going mad. Still, the fact remains that he is entering a superstitious crowd participating in a superstitious practice, as the noise of the Exchange fades behind him and is replaced with the distant rush and wind of the harbor.

It's been a while since he has passed through, but Kaz notes that the old tradition concerning Zentsbridge hasn't died; the iron grating is still decorated with knots of rope, ribbons, and even what he assumes to be locks of lovers' hair, each one supposedly a prayer for a safe return from the sea. Most of these are self-directed, left behind by sailors who have docked in Ketterdam's harbor, but others are well-wishes from family, spouses, sweethearts, and the like—practically anyone who believes that it'll do any good.

Kaz considers whether or not he, with the strand of rope fraying in his pocket, can be counted among them. Instead of trusting Inej to see her own safe passage home, he's here, tying a wish to a bridge, leaving it to rot in the damp Ketterdam air as if it'll do any good. Does this make him more of a believer, then, or less?

He hears Inej's voice in his memory as if she stands beside him. *Men mock the gods until they need them, Kaz.*

It's late morning, the closest that Ketterdam has to a quiet hour, and he makes it almost halfway across the bridge before he sees anyone else. It's a boy, maybe university age but barely so, standing very still, eyes fixed on the iron grid. He makes no sound to interrupt the rhythm of Kaz's wooden cane against the boards, nor any sign that he's heard it at all.

Just as well, Kaz decides. Just as well that he's not attracting attention or interruption. There is real danger present, to be sure, but he also feels unbearably vulnerable like this—when he withdraws the rope from his pocket and his wedding band catches a rare thread of sunlight, he feels as if he's stepped out onto East Stave with a target hung around his neck. But the boy doesn't seem to notice, and there's no one else around.

It wasn't not so long ago that he might've said *young man* instead of *boy.* But the student—if that's what he is, based on the tidy cut of his jacket and his worn leather satchel—is Jordan's age, and if Kaz himself was once a boy prepared to tear down empires and build his own, well, now he is a father. He doesn't look at the boy he was with a parental fondness, or

anything of the sort, but he does consider, sometimes, how young he was. How young they all were. That is the one thing about Colm Fahey that he can understand.

Spend a little more time in Ketterdam. You'll feel ancient.

Kaz slips his oyster knife down from his sleeve—a long-kept standby—and slashes the length of rope in half. This does draw the student's attention, and he looks at Kaz with a bald stare that shows he's not a Ketterdam native; everyone hides everything in this city. Letting others see where your attention is focused is an excellent way to become someone's mark. Then again, the look reminds him of a much younger Wylan, who technically was born and raised in the city—though maybe that's just the red hair.

It's like breathing, for Kaz, to take stock of his surroundings, particularly the people—anyone can be of help or harm to him if he notices the right things. This is where the hat comes in handy; the brim is excellent for obscuring exactly what he's looking at, especially when his hands are busy tying a pair of knots. It doesn't take much to get a picture of the kid, broadly speaking—dressed on the shabby side of modest, his demeanor overly serious, as if he's putting up a front—but there are certain details that Kaz gets stuck on. There's something in the shape of the student's eyes that prods at his memory.

Presumably unaware of the fact that he's being watched, the boy kneels to find a spot that's empty of any other fraying prayers, then unwinds a bit of twine from his fingers. He doesn't tie it like a thief or a sailor, or even the usual way; instead, he loops it into a simple bow, even adjusting the tails to make them straight.

Kaz is tempted to scowl—it's a uselessly neat and pretty thing, made ineffective for it—but instead, he returns his attention to his own work. He ties off each half of the rope to make two knots, the second slightly smaller than the first. It's doubtful that they'll last. His are not sailor's knots; he knows how to tie things to withstand human strength, not all the weathering and fury of the True Sea. Perhaps it's just as well. He has no prayers to weave into them.

Would Inej call this blasphemy? For him to stand in what is supposedly a holy place, to follow the practice, and have no god or Saint to dedicate it to?

He's heard what the rescued ones call her. To live in her presence is to live in a holy place. Maybe, for him, this is but a cheap replacement.

"Are those both for you?"

Kaz turns towards the boy, sharply enough to show that he can defend himself. "You think I'm hoarding prayers? Taking more than my fair share?"

The boy blinks. His expressions really are reminiscent of Wylan at that age. "I didn't mean to offend—"

"I doubt it would do any good." Kaz brushes some imaginary dust from the head of his cane. He can't shake the sense that his bare hands seem glaringly vulnerable. "I've heard that no Saint favors the greedy."

“I wouldn’t know.” The kid shrugs and stands up. “I don’t pray to Saints. And I don’t know if this is anything Ghezen would care about. But it’s worth a try.”

Kaz give a dry laugh. He keeps his face turned away, towards the canal where it winds away between the austere buildings of the Financial District. “If you are rewarded, it won’t be for your faith.”

He’s almost surprised to hear the boy answer with a laugh of his own. “Trying it has to be worth something.” He hesitates, toying with one of the tails of the bow, then—“Mine’s for my…my girl. So.”

Kaz disregards the need to explain the second knot, or anything else. “So is mine.”

He glances over at the boy, who’s wearing a sheepish smile, one so open and uncomplicated that he might as well be walking around with jewels spilling from his pockets. He’s just begging to have it stolen. “Sorry. I’ll leave you to your…” He gestures with one hand, half-covered in a fingerless glove.

Kaz gives what could be described as a nod, if one were feeling generous. He hears the student walk away, down the empty bridge, and wonders what story the kid has come up with about him. What would he be, through the eyes of a boy who was allowed to be one? A plain man dressed in common clothes, leaving the two knots on the iron grating: one for wife and one for daughter.

Kaz steps away, leaning on the rough-carved cane more heavily than he usually would; the old break has been emanating pain since the weather began to turn cold, and to be weak is not as often lethal for plain and common men. It will be a long walk home.

Behind him, he leaves the only evidence that he’s been here: two bits of rope, lashed to Zentsbridge with a prayer to Sankta Inej—that she will see herself safely home.

Chapter End Notes

Zentsbridge is spelled with a Z in one book and and S in the other, so I just picked the spelling that I like better.

also, please feed the author! I am more dependent on comments than I like to admit.

Alby/Inej

Chapter Summary

Alby loses his coat. Kaz and Inej meet a surprise guest.

Chapter Notes

I just noticed when titling this chapter that the POVs pair very nicely with those from last chapter. That's all the exciting news I've got for today—other than, thank you to everyone for the amazing welcome back—so let's get straight into shout-outs~

always_reading2027, I'm glad Stefan managed to (even partially) redeem himself in your eyes :)

SilvervFirefly, the Zentsbridge scene was a last-minute idea that I think will have a fascinating effect on what comes next.

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, characterization is suuuuper important to me, so this comment means a lot <3

jzmn8r, it sure says something interesting about how much our prejudices and preconceived notions can change things, doesn't it?

Lunarmoo, in regards to Stefan—this is six of crows, so of *course* no one can be fully good or bad.

thephonyqueenofengland, this isn't super related to the comment, but you are enough of a dedicated commenter that my phone now suggests your username XD

cameliawrites, I can't wait for the girls to start pointing out the Kaz-Alby similarities—they'll be devastated XD

Bisexual_Pretzel, you sound so certain that they're going to meet! whatever could give you that idea…..

Not another confused platypus!, I like to think that Jordan and Stefan's interaction sits right on the line between comedic and tragic, given the source of their differences.

BeluKortasOrang, while I do love this comment and all of the detail in it, now I'm curious about which parts you're rereading XD

Pipperdoo, tbh, readers like you are the reason I keep coming back to this <3

maiden_of_crows, honestly, the selling point for AO3 altogether for me was that people like you exist here, writing entire literary analyses on our silly little stories. Please don't let me keep you from school, though ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alby is climbing the stairs to his room, hands empty of a letter from his father. Again.

Between his da and Jordan, he knows the path back and forth from the mailroom better than any other part of the University, but with Jordan arriving back in the city today and his father's letters growing fewer and farther between, these trips are becoming fruitless. He tries to tell himself that he shouldn't be disappointed, that those letters were getting repetitive anway— *stay out of the Barrel, or better yet, get out of the city*— but it doesn't quite smooth over the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It's not like he's been that great about writing back, admittedly. He can report the happenings of his day-to-day life, but what can he say that matters? He can't talk about Jordan. His father knows nothing about her, and though Alby only knows a few, disconnected pieces of the reason why, Jordan insists that it should stay that way. So…he does as she says and omits her from his letters. On paper, his life seems to have gaping holes wherever Jordan is removed from it, but what else is he supposed to do?

Koen will occasionally grow bold enough to tease Alby about her, though he backs off almost immediately afterwards. By now, this being their second year together, Alby has stopped waiting for Koen to come out of his shell—there isn't a shell, really, that's just his nature. Perhaps they make a good pair, if a funny one to see together—Alby, ginger and tallish, gentle-featured and patched at the joints and edges; and Koen, mostly shades of brown, mouselike, forever dwarfed by lumpy handmade sweaters.

Speaking of Koen, I need to get my jacket back. Koen has been borrowing it since the history buildings are constantly freezing, but Alby has it on good authority that Jordan likes it on him, and Jordan's opinion wins.

Alby rolls one shoulder back and holds the railing, as if it'll make the climb easier with his backpack weighing him down. His shoulders are going to ache regardless of the stairs, but they certainly aren't helping. He just wishes he could talk to Koen—or anyone, really—about his father. Well, he's meant to meet Jordan at the Boeksplein today, so he can tell her about it (along with the laundry list of other things he has to tell her.)

Ghezen, he's missed her.

He steps onto the landing and peers down the hallway, but it's empty, typical for midday. As he walks, he wonders if he should tell Jordan about the man he encountered at Zentsbridge. That, however, would require him to admit that he was there at all.

When he reaches his door, Alby swings his bag onto one shoulder, then pauses to fish in his pocket for his key, extract it, and fit it into the lock. The *click* when he turns it seems oddly

loud—usually he would've heard Koen muttering his vocabulary terms by now.

Maybe he's out. Their schedules are far from the same every day, after all. Alby pushes the door open and starts into the room.

He gets one foot over the threshold.

There is blood on the rug, the braided one that Koen's aunt sent him in a care package. There is a stain near the edge and what must have been a puddle in the middle. Atop the stain lies a hand, which is attached to an arm, which is attached to a shoulder and a chest, which is attached to the rest of Koen. Alby's mind refuses to connect the pieces. He hears a strangled, choking sort of noise, and thinks for a second that maybe Koen is still alive—but no, it came from *him* .

Alby stands frozen and feels a horrible sort of nothing. *Ah,* he thinks blankly, *I'm in shock.*

His bag slides from his shoulder and slams into the ground, making Alby jump back and stumble, almost tipping over backwards. It seems to kick-start his pulse, which tears away as if running for its life. He might have to, Alby realizes. His eyes flick to the window, but it's shut, all the dust still in place from before.

The room was locked—so how—

He should—should find a teacher, or at least an older student, or better yet the *stadwatch.* Someone else, someone who would know what to do.

He *should.*

Unsure if he's breathing, Alby steps into the room, abandoning his bag so that it props the door open. Everything is eerily unstirred. His bed is rumpled as he left it. Koen's journal lies open on the desk, to a page with the day's date scrawled at the top and nothing else. Alby wishes he could just feel *something* , but it's all like a page from a book, like a drawing. It isn't real. He could spill water on it, or tear it up, or rub it away with an eraser, and it would be gone.

He can't bring himself to look at Koen's face. The bloodstain seems like it's coming from a wound on his back, but Alby makes no move to turn him over and check. He'll say it's because he doesn't want to disturb the evidence, but trying to touch his roommate's body would be like trying to touch a hot stove. He doesn't think his mind would let him—and if he did, he doubts it'd let him forget. What if Koen is cold already?

He has my jacket on , Alby thinks nonsensically. *He won't be cold.*

He kneels and realizes that he's shaking. That…makes sense, probably. The blood is fresh enough, or heavy enough, that it soaks into the knees of his trousers. Alby gently lifts Koen's glasses off, keeping his eyes and fingers away from Koen's face, then slips the glasses into his pocket. *So much for not messing with evidence.* He wants to laugh, but feels like he shouldn't. Nothing is real, right now.

He turns to leave, and then he sees it—a black feather, tucked into the buttonhole of Koen's — *his*— green wool jacket. A crow's feather.

Alby feels as if he, too, is no longer real. He was a dream that Koen was having, and now he is nothing at all. But if he were real, he would need to tell someone—to get help. He's on a university campus. There will be people who know what to do.

But what about the feather? Can any of those people tell him that it isn't the reason he's stopping himself from imagining, that it isn't the truth he refuses to believe?

None of them will know. But he has a date to keep with someone who does.

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He doesn't have to look for Jordan, when he steps onto Speaker's Bridge. There isn't much of a crowd, but there could be a parade going on and he'd find her regardless. The sun has left its handprints on her, and she's beautiful in a way he's scared to look at for too long.

Alarm lights up her face as he gets closer. "Alby!" She runs over to meet him, her steps silent even on the wooden planks. "What did you do? Are you hurt?"

Alby blinks. This is, he finds, something that he has to do consciously. "I—no, I'm fine—why did you—?"

"There's blood all over your pants," says Jordan, planting her hands on her hips. Alby's never heard her say much about her mother, but he likes to imagine that Jordan is imitating her now. "Have you started getting into fights while I'm gone? Without me there to defend your honor?"

Normally, he'd laugh, but the world is going by too quickly and too slowly at the same time. "It's not mine," says Alby, which he belatedly realizes is just making things worse. He just… he can't seem to connect his thoughts, much less say any of it out loud. "Something… happened."

Jordan grabs him by the sleeve and drags him over to the railing. "Okay. Okay. Just—" She lifts her hands and draws them back, looking uncertain for a moment, but then she sets her hands on either side of his face—not touching, but hovering there.

Alby remembers to blink again.

"Can I?" Jordan prompts.

"Oh. Oh, right—yeah. You don't…you don't have to ask, you know." Alby is dimly aware that he has something probably urgent to tell her, but that fact is failing to break through the haze of shock.

"Habit," says Jordan with a slight smile, cupping his face. "So. Tell me what happened. Tell me slowly if you have to. But not too slow. I have a bad attention span."

Alby is finding that his attention, too, is limited—or at least, entirely focused on the late-sun mirage of her eyes. But if he shuts his own, all he sees is Koen's body, sprawled across the bloodstained braided rug. He leans into the steady warmth of Jordan's touch, trying to empty his mind of everything else. "I—I was going back to my room. To our room. My…No, my room, I guess." His voice trembles as if on the edge of something—a delirious laugh, maybe, or a fall that will shatter it. He presses on. "And Koen—my, my roommate, Koen—I let him borrow my jacket, because it's always cold in the history buildings, even though I don't see how that is because this city doesn't give up its heat more than it does anything else. But the science ones aren't bad, usually, so I…" He realizes the breath and voice have died in his chest. What is he saying? Why does any of this matter?

He can't remember. He doesn't want to remember.

"Okay," Jordan says softly, her thumb trailing over his cheek. Alby wishes he had freckles for her to trace. He's never heard her sound gentle like this. "So he borrowed your coat. What then?"

"I'm sorry," says Alby, and he hears himself growing frantic. It's strange to hear it and feel nothing—he has no heart to race, no throat to grow thin and tight as he speaks, no understanding of this panic. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know I'm not—that I'm being too—I—"

Jordan's thumb comes to rest on his lips. "Don't be sorry," she says sternly, holding his gaze —as if he could look away. Her eyes fill his vision. "Something bad happened. The only reason to tell me fast is if I can do something fast about it."

Her accent has gotten thicker, he thinks. She had only a whisper of one before. "He's dead. Koen. Someone murdered him." The words hit the ground like footfalls and run away before he can drag them back and put them in order.

He shuts his eyes. The room is printed on the back of them, the crow's feather over Koen's heart.

Jordan is quiet. He didn't think anything *could* make her speechless.

Against it, his voice sounds very small indeed. "There was a—a feather. On his coat. My coat. A crow feather."

He feels Jordan's hand fall still. It is the first real thing he's felt since he stepped into that dormitory.

"Open your eyes," she says, and he does. He looks at her, at her face, like it's the only certain thing he knows. "I know who you need to talk to. But neither of you are going to like it."

To dislike something seems so trivial now, so laughable—he almost doesn't understand what she means. The world is made of disconnected pieces, nothing relating, nothing explaining anything else. Alby can't bear the thought of facing it alone. So, when Jordan starts off down the bridge, her fingers laced into his, he follows.

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Normally, Inej would return to Thirteen Zelverstraat once her crew and ships have been settled, but given the time of day, she knew where she'd find Kaz—the Crow Club, where she now finds herself. These early-evening hours are when business begins to pick up, and she knows that he likes to be there to oversee the players.

He is overseeing very little right now, however, given that he is instead sitting in one of the private booths with her. They are seated side by side on the same bench, arms resting against each other from shoulder to elbow, her hand on top of his, toying with his ring. She treasures this kind of casual touch more than she dares to explain; it was once the greatest kind of impossible, and even now it drives them to sit in a reverent sort of silence.

Kaz turns his hand over and folds his fingers around hers, eyes on the lines where their palms intersect. She sinks into the rhythm of his breath like a song, like a melody her mother might have lulled her to sleep with as a child.

"He made it three days past our leaving," she murmurs, watching his thumb brush up and down against the side of her hand.

Kaz's grasp tightens. "You couldn't have stayed," he says, a gentle kind of sternness in his voice that he reserves only for her.

She knows. Her crew had a schedule to keep. The ships would deteriorate if left to sit. She knows, she really does. But why, with all of her other crimes, could she not bring herself to be selfish this once? The feeling that her mother was right, that her mission matters more than her family, waits just behind her. It's tailing her, and she can't seem to shake it off.

She knows Kaz is doing what he can for her. To sit with her, to hold her—it's not in his nature. He is trying, as she's always asked him to. But Inej knows, as she knows her basest truths, that nothing but time will cure this hollow feeling inside her.

A sound of footsteps approaching the door causes them both to look up, to shift minutely apart. Inej slides a knife in her hand, and she doesn't need to look to know that Kaz is also armed. They exchange no knowing glances; they've been doing this together for too long. (Or long enough, depending on which way one views it).

The door is locked. This only ensures that the only people who can get in are the people able to pick it.

"We could pretend we're…busy," says Kaz, turning to her, his dark eyes intent on her face. There's a clear quirk of a joke around his mouth. "Drive them off." Inej wonders if she shouldn't humor him, not right now, but honestly—an escape from the previous topic seems all too alluring.

"We'd be out of luck if they're a voyeur," she muses, but she finds herself meeting his eyes, her voice slipping lower and huskier regardless. "And I'm afraid we're too recognizable, *me vrano.* "

"Blame these past months. They've put ideas into my head." Normally, that self-satisfied lift of his brow would frustrate her to no end, but now it's maddeningly attractive.

“We will be home soon enough, with plenty of time for me to romance you,” Inej teases back. Some small, competitive part of her refuses to be the only one made to feel this way. Besides, there is a note of pride that curls in her chest like a contented cat—the sailors may brag about returning to impatient and ravenous wives, but she has the Bastard of the Barrel waiting for her, heat simmering in his dark eyes, her ring on his clever trickster hands. She is the queen of this city, and they don’t even know it. But who would believe it? Not even she did, once.

We’ll be kings and queens, Inej. Kings and queens.

Still—what she said is true. While her face has been kept as secret as possible since she left Ketterdam, there are still people around from Kaz’s time who remember his Wraith. They’ve kept any associations between them secret for long enough that it would be a shame to ruin it now. So, instead, she pulls away from him, prepared to spring into the rafters.

The door clicks and slides open. Inej takes in a breath to prepare herself to move. When she can see through the doorway, however, it reveals that it’s only Jordan—there’s an odd expression on her face, but there’s no doubt that this is their girl. “Hi,” she says, sounding slightly out of breath.

Now they *do* exchange a look. Inej notes that one of her daughter’s hands is grasping something obscured by the edge of the doorway. It is odd that they could hear her coming—unless she’s not alone.

“So I’m not gonna say that I want you to meet someone. But I do need you to meet someone.” Before either of them can say anything, she drags a dazed and frightened-looking young man into view, then pushes him through the doorway with just as much force.

The knees of his trousers are bloodied, Inej notes. His startlingly red hair is in complete disarray, and he blinks as if something has surprised him.

Jordan waves her hands in his direction like a magician presenting the finale of their trick.

“Hello,” he squeaks, sounding slightly Kaelish.

Beside her, Kaz has gone very still and very quiet. Does their guest know, she wonders, that this is tantamount to a screaming alarm?

Well. She can almost find it within herself to pity the poor boy. *Almost.* Inej smiles a wicked, wicked smile, setting her knife in plain view on the table . “Hello again, Alby.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for the amazing welcome back! most return chapters after a break or hiatus don’t do very well as feedback goes, but you all have been amazing <3

Alby/Jordan

Chapter Summary

Alby asks for help. Jordan tries to give some.

Chapter Notes

apologies for the cliffhanger last time! that was a little cruel of me. I won't keep you from the next chapter any longer, so let's get on with the shout-outs~

always_reading2027, I love writing cliffhangers because watching you guys scream in the comments is the best.

BeluKertasOrang, look, at least I admit my cruelty, hehe

jzmn8r, I also love Alby and Jordan—look at them, moving the next generation forward from their parents' trauma <3

JustaBoredFrog, I hope I was able to alleviate some stress from school <3

EyesJustReading, I *love* that gif! And I'm honored to be on the recieving end hehe

SilvervFirefly, you'll have to let me know how accurate your prediction was.

Bisexual_Pretzel, I'm curious to see if your theories change or not after reading this chapter.

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, I think that's exactly what he's thinking right now.

Lunarmoo, fear not, you get to read that reaction now!

eekabee, more has arrived!

thephonyqueenofengland, I really do love watching you guys theorize.

arggghhh, I do wish we had spent a little more time with Koen before I had to kill him off. Ah well.

Alby wonders how much more he can take. Maybe he has already passed that point. That would certainly explain the terrible nothingness that he’s feeling, as if he’s drifting in some

current, as if he's given up on fighting it. All of this is happening on the shore as he floats further and further away.

"I…don't think we've met," he says, observing distantly how dazed he sounds, how hollow. This woman is completely unfamiliar, other than the ways she reminds him of Jordan—the knives, the gleaming-sharp smile. But Jordan's father…

A man in a plain wool coat, scarf threaded around his shoulders, hat pulled low over his dark eyes. Two strands of rope in his hand. "I've heard that no Saint favors the greedy."

He was leaving a prayer for his girl, Alby had said. And the most dangerous man in Ketterdam had done the same.

Some part of him wants to laugh. *This might as well happen.* Should he say anything? Will it win him an ally? "You're…"

Kaz Brekker tilts his head slightly, and as if he'd pressed a button, Alby shuts up.

You're the man from the bridge.

And that might be the most surprising thing about this—the Bastard of the Barrel, a nightmare with a crooked crown and a crow's-head cane, is really just…a man. His hair is cut and pushed back in the style the criminals favor, but he's dressed like a rich man, all dark tones and fine tailoring. Maybe Alby is just too overwhelmed to be afraid anymore, or maybe he just can't stop seeing his memory of that same face dressed in plain homespun and softer around the eyes, but—this is no demon. This is Jordan's da.

(Who could still very much kill him, but someone may have already tried).

Alby runs a hand through his hair, as if it isn't already a hopeless mess. "I—I need your help. Or…Jordan says I do. And she's usually right."

Her mother gives a very slight smile, and Alby has the sense that he's earned some favor in her eyes. *Good. I need all the help I can get.*

"Jordan says you do." Jordan's da, on the other hand, has a razor edge to his voice, his eyes fixed on some distant point, head cocked to one side. Alby swallows. Maybe he does have some room left for fear.

" *Da.* " Jordan crosses her arms.

"Shut the door," Brekker says irritably.

Jordan does. "We've *talked* about this," she says, her voice pitching up with some implication that Alby is content to leave alone.

"And I promised you nothing. That would oblige me to keep my word." Alby feels dizzy. This same man was a gang leader prepared to lead a full interrogation a moment ago. What are they even arguing about? As much as he trusts Jordan, he's starting to wonder if she made a mistake. They're wasting their time here, while Koen…

To his horror, Alby feels his eyes sting. He stares resolutely down at his shoes. It's not like he needs to give Jordan's parents any impression that he can protect her—it's *Jordan* —but he'd still like to seem competent. Or, at least, something more than an incoherent, weepy mess.

Jordan and her da are still bickering, but her mother is very quiet, and Alby realizes that she's looking at him. Her silence has a voice of its own, almost louder than all of the other noise. Suddenly it's like he can breathe again, and hesitantly, Alby meets her eyes.

"Please," he says quietly. He doesn't know how she hears him over the conversation, but she nods, her smile turning gentle and barely-there. She looks at her husband and daughter, and it's as if they feel her gaze; the argument dissolves, and they turn their attention to her. Who is this, who can still Dirtyhands with a look? Alby is almost certain he'd remember her.

Hello again, *she said.* What did that mean? It's one more question to add to the pile. One of too many. It's getting hard to take in air.

Jordan's mother, however, seems to breathe calm into the room. "He's here now," she says, her voice trimmed around the edges with what he thinks is a Suli accent. "We can hear him out."

"Alby?" When Jordan looks at him, there is some gentle and terrible thing in her eyes that almost makes Alby wish he'd figured out how to deal with this alone. He doesn't want their pity. It makes it far too hard to keep feeling numb.

"I don't—I don't even know what I'm asking for," he says, eyes still on the ground, willing his voice not to crack. He's shaking now, and can't stop; whatever force has a hold of him, it's stronger than his meager will. "You were the one who said I should talk to them."

Jordan slips her hand into his, and Alby nearly winces at the shift in the room's atmosphere, but she seems to pay it no mind. "Trust a criminal to solve a crime," she says, and he can hear the smile in her voice. He almost hates it. For once, he wishes she would break along with him, just so that he'd feel he had permission to be broken.

Alby inhales, as if he can take courage into his lungs, but the air has none to give him. He looks up, at these people who, he's now thinking, seem awfully young to be Jordan's parents. "I think…someone tried to kill me."

"You think," says Jordan's da. Something about the rough and grating texture of his voice is unnerving. Alby can't tell if he's being questioned or mocked.

"Someone…did kill my roommate." Alby swallows hard, but the thing that's risen up in his throat is thick and unmoving. He feels Jordan squeeze his hand. "He'd borrowed my coat. I know it's a stretch. But…"

He hesitates. *The crow's feather.*

He knows who this is, that he's talking to. The sight of a Crow Club poster had been enough for his father to forbid him from writing to Jordan, almost enough to stop him from letting Alby go to Ketterdam at all. He knows they're enemies, enough to make his father afraid.

And. Well. Pekka Rollins is an easily frightened man these days. But Alby knows that he wasn't always that way.

"...but my father has enemies. You…you probably know that." Wonderful, now he's reminded them of the reasons they have to hate him, not to mention giving them one more by seeming like an idiot.

Jordan's da raises an eyebrow, hands resting on the carved head of his cane. "I'm one of those enemies . I'm sure you know that." He states it so calmly. But maybe having enemies only means something to the ones who fear them.

It's strange, to have seen the man apart from the mythos. Conceptually, Alby knows what Dirtyhands is capable of—he's heard the stories, seen the results. The man has a city crushed in his fist. But it's hard to associate that with the man at Zentsbridge, or even the one in front of him.

"I do." Alby is surprised by how level is voice is. His hands are still shaking like mad, but he doesn't look away. "Whoever killed—whoever killed Koen, they left a crow's feather behind. Over his heart. Was it you?"

I really have gone mad , he thinks, watching the room like a scene from a play. *Well, maybe after Jordan's parents run me through and hang me over the Crow Club doors, I'll see Koen again. I'll tell him I tried.*

To his vague surprise, Dirtyhands almost smirks. "No. I'd do a better job of it."

"I have no reason to believe you," Alby says cautiously. While it's a miracle that he's still alive, he knows better than to give over too much trust, especially to the Bastard of the Barrel.

Dirtyhands tilts his head in a nod. "None whatsoever."

"You'd be wiser not to," Jordan agrees, as if this is normal.

"Let's say I do." Alby exhales and releases Jordan's hand to step closer to the table. "Could you help me find out who did? If you're telling the truth, they're probably trying to frame you."

The smirk grows by a fraction, and something flashes in Brekker's black eyes. He seems almost pleased to be challenged. "You went to Jordan before the *stadwatch* , which means that you knew they couldn't get the job done. If some skiv is trying to pin this on me, they'll need to try harder."

"You went to Jordan before the *stadwatch?* " Jordan's mother sounds vaguely exasperated.

Jordan makes an affirmative noise from somewhere behind him. "I trained him well."

"I know that people like you pay them off," Alby says, wishing his hands would stop trembling. "They'd think you did it, but they can't make a charge stick to you, so then they would just stop looking. And someone has to be found."

“You did train him well,” Jordan’s mother muses, almost affectionately, though she hasn’t put the knife down yet. “ *Can* you help him, Kaz? I’ve heard you’re missing your best spy.”

Jordan makes an irritated noise. Alby doesn’t have the energy to wonder what that’s about.

“A circumstance that changed recently.” Jordan’s da isn’t trying very hard to sound cross. Alby is still wondering how few people know that Kaz Brekker is *married* .

“Fine, so you can do it?” he asks, unable to help how impatient he sounds.

Dirtyhands rests his cane against the table and sits back to look up at Alby. “I could,” he says. “Are you making an offer?”

“Da—” Jordan starts in.

Alby isn’t surprised. There’s enough Kerch in him to know that everything is business. “If someone’s trying to frame you, then it’s in your interests to prove you didn’t do it, right?” He’d really love to know what emergency reserve this confidence has been hiding in. If someone told yesterday’s Alby that his method of coping with trauma would be to strike a deal with Dirtyhands, he’d have sent them over to the medical students for mental study. And then maybe gone along with them himself.

Jordan’s da folds his hands on the table. “If someone is trying to frame me, they’ve botched the job. I don’t need to prove who it *was* to show that it wasn’t me or any of my Dregs.” Alby senses that he’s being challenged, and honestly? He’s past the point of caring.

He plants his hands on the table. “Look. Honestly, at this point, I don’t care who solves it—it could be you, or the *stadwatch,* or a talking seagull for all I care. I just…” His hands curl into fists, and suddenly it’s like the *nothing* he’s been feeling is incinerated, replaced by a fury that burns its way up his throat. “He was like my brother. He was the closest thing I had. And he’s dead, and I want someone to pay for it.”

Jordan’s parents exchange some look that he doesn’t understand, and he wants to scream. He looks to Jordan, hoping she’ll explain, but she’s watching them too.

Please, someone make this make sense. Or just…put it back. Put it back the way it was.

Jordan’s mother rises from the bench and steps around the table to face him. She moves as if she’s made of smoke. She extends one hand with the same bare sliver of a smile as before. “We can help you.”

Alby shakes her hand; it’s rough, leathery and calloused.

“Inej,” she says. “But people used to call me the Wraith.”

Alby makes eye contact with Jordan’s da over her shoulder. He stares intently back. They make a silent addendum to their agreement: no introductions are needed.

<><><>

Eventually, Kaz and Inej leave, off to gather more information; this leaves Jordan alone with Alby. She should probably just be happy that her parents are letting them be alone together, in the Crow Club of all places.

What do you think my trust looks like?

Maybe, Jordan thinks, it looks a little like this.

She sits beside Alby on the bench, their hands resting entwined on the table, both of them watching the line that her thumb is tracing up and down the side of his first finger. They haven't talked much, and Jordan is itching inside with a thousand things to say, but none of them seem right. It's just that she knows the wrong thing is going to spill out of her eventually, if she's forced to stay quiet.

"He's not…like I thought," Alby says at last. His voice still sounds weird—empty, hazy. Like there's nothing to ground it.

"He's not like anybody thinks," Jordan agrees. "But you probably grew up with stories of Dirtyhands coming to get you if you were bad, didn't you?"

Alby winces slightly. "No. Actually, I…never really heard about him until I came here. Sounds like Kerch children hear those stories, though."

"Not me," Jordan muses. Honestly, the more she thinks about it, the more she realizes that she…hasn't gotten in trouble much. Inej would do things like take away her sweets or favorite playthings (or knives) when she misbehaved, but mostly, if Jordan wanted to do something, she was just armed with the tools to do it safely and sent out into the wild to chase it. The exception being Alby.

She understands better now. She knows that she isn't the first Jordan. But she can't explain to Alby how much it means that Kaz, or either of them really, is letting him stay.

"Aren't you afraid it's going to…end?" Alby says hesitantly, fingers flexing against hers.

Jordan looks sideways to him, but he isn't looking at her. She wishes he would. He's so hard to understand sometimes. And she knows that she lives with two of the most contrary and inscrutable people in the world, so maybe Alby is just too normal. "What's going to end?"

"This—" he gestures with his free hand. "The whole 'King of Ketterdam' thing. Every king falls. It's history." He swallows hard, then, "You could've asked Koen. He knows—knew all about that stuff."

Jordan feels, for a moment, hopelessly out of her depth. She has been the object of secondhand grief, for a lost child-self, a lost brother. She has been what someone wished they could get back. But she's never been a witness to sheer, bald loss like this. She can't pretend that she is what he lost. She can't give him closure. She can't give him anything, it seems, that matters.

But maybe she's led him to someone who can.

“I don’t know, I…I guess I hadn’t thought about it. I just can’t imagine anyone…taking him down, taking over. It seems almost silly to think about.” Jordan knows that no one is invincible, and maybe it’s the starry-eyed child in her talking, but that doesn’t change the truth. “I think he’d have to make the choice. To let someone else take over.”

Alby keeps watching the motion of her thumb, steady as a current. At last he says, “Do you think he would?”

Her da who reads novels in the evening and can’t handle his spice and plays the piano in his rarest and best moods—he would. But Kaz Brekker, the Bastard of the Barrel? Jordan isn’t so sure. And she can’t explain any of it. “I…don’t know.”

Alby is silent for a moment, then he says, “So you’re sort of a…criminal princess, huh?”

Jordan leans against his shoulder. “I guess so.” She’s never thought of it that way. It isn’t like she’s the heir to the Dregs. She doesn’t want to take over, and Kaz would probably never let her anyway.

“You know, my da used to call me his Kaelish prince. When I was little.”

That sounds familiar. She just can’t place it.

“You can be my prince now, if you like,” says Jordan, squeezing his hand. But he looks away, and she doesn’t understand it.

“What if…” His voice has grown so soft, so small. She wants to cradle it in her hands, like a flame that threatens to go out. “What if that ends too?”

Jordan finds that she feels quieter along with him. She wants to just say that it won’t. But she isn’t sure she has Kaz’s skill for lying. “That’s the risk we run when we make ourselves royal.”

“Is that even worth it?” He’s still speaking to the wall. Maybe Jordan should be hurt that he’s questioning her, or them, but right now she just wishes he’d look at her.

“I think a crown is worth the time you wear it.” She leans forward, trying to look around his bent shoulders, to turn his attention back to her. “But it’s different with people.”

Jordan thinks, for the first time in a long time, of Mama One.

“I’m not the one with a head for numbers,” she goes on, “but—if you take who you were before a person, and subtract that from who you are after, the worth is in the difference.”

Alby turns halfway back to her, now staring with empty eyes at the door. “Then I’m worth twice as much with you. Three times. Maybe ten.”

Jordan tries to laugh, but something has a grasp behind her ribs and it’s squeezing tight. “I thought we were only adding and subtracting.”

Alby gives the barest motion of his head. She wishes she could see his expression. “For you, I have to multiply.” He shouldn’t be giving those words to her. She’s supposed to be keeping *him* together.

Whatever it is that has a hold of Jordan will no longer let her speak. She leans close and flicks one of the curls at his brow, but whatever she might have hoped to say fades when Alby looks up and meets her eyes. His expression is so…torn open, she feels like she should avert her gaze. It’s like staring into a bleeding wound. But Alby cups her cheek with his free hand, keeping her there, refusing to let her look away. A shine rises in his eyes. Jordan wonders if he’s crying. She thinks she might be. All she can hear is his breath, soft and shattered.

“Jordan,” he says, and his voice breaks. “Are you sure your da didn’t do it?”

She rests her forehead against his. His eyes are all she can see. “Certain. As certain as I’ve been of anything.”

“Okay. Okay.” Alby shuts his eyes, and Jordan does too, and then she thinks they might both be crying, clinging to one another as if it’ll hold them together. “Okay,” he repeats.

Jordan pulls him into her arms, and he fits perfectly against the cradle of her body, his face tucked beside her neck, her cheek pressed to his curls. She holds him so tightly she’d dare the Tides to take him. “Okay,” she says, and it reminds her of the Suli chants that Stefan taught her, the songs they sung after the dancing had faded and the fires were only embers. Songs for the ending of things. “It’s okay,” she lies, for she is a liar and the daughter of one. “You’re okay.”

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej updates Jordan and Alby on the investigation.

Chapter Notes

it's friday, which means that I am *back* with another chapter! I also have what will probably be a two-shot soulmate AU in the works, which is partially to blame for the length of the chapter this week. that said, before ados are in any way furthered, let's get on with your shout-outs~

always_reading2027, of course, it's not like anyone can know that kaz might be doing something superstitious—particularly for reasons related to having *feelings*.

BeluKertasOrang, I am very relieved to be forgiven XD

greenleaf777, I'm glad I could give you a little reward after a hard shift <3

Bisexual_Pretzel, the comparison to royalty struck me (as most great ideas do) while I was in the shower, and I was so excited that I had to rush to write it down, lol.

jzmn8r, to be fair, Jordan is both placating and wanting something in that conversation, hehe. she knows her power.

thephonyqueenofengland, I too am a sucker for outside perspectives on kanej. what they have is so normalized for them, but to everyone else it's somewhere between confusing and terrifying.

Lunarmoo, I'm weirdly proud of kanej, watching as their parenting skills have developed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej slides into one of the back booths at the Crow and Cup, across from Jordan and Alby. She is dressed once again in the black of the Wraith, or what still fits her, that is—she has gained muscle in some places and lost it in others, her body following the changing demands of the sea. Sometimes she wonders if she should be ashamed of it, if beauty is a thing she should be conscious she has lost, but Kaz holds only reverence in his eyes for her, regardless of the form she takes.

He is at the Silver Six now, avoiding their being seen together—even here, tucked into a corner with only Jordan and Alby, Inej has her hood pulled up, and she is tempted to don her mask as well. Kaz would probably want her to. But a part of her feels as if it's the net all over again—does he not trust her to protect herself, all of them, if being with him puts a target on her back? Does he not believe that they can fight their way out together, as he once promised?

She's always stood with him on the necessity of protecting Jordan, but—their girl is armed with her own set of claws and armored with their reputations. Besides, she has the growing suspicion that someone already knows: They ran Pekka Rollins out of Ketterdam decades ago. If Alby has any remaining enemies, they're more likely after his connection to Jordan.

That, Inej supposes, is what brings her to where she is now—tracing old footpaths over Ketterdam's skyline, hunching over maps and scrap paper with Kaz the way they used to do, but this time, bringing Jordan into the hunt. She feels so aware of what is different. They will never be those children again. Jordan is nearly the age they were, and to look at it that way makes the world like an hourglass—turn it upside down, and suddenly the sand rushes through so fast. Its growing absence shows the passage of years in real time.

Was there no one to protect you?

No. No, there never was—not really. The only prayer of thanks she can say for this is that she became the one to protect Jordan. They have spared their little crow from growing up as fast as they once did. Inej doesn't think of herself as a motherly type; it has never come naturally to her, not even when she was a child being handed a squalling newborn by some auntie or other and trying to escape to go run through the fields. Still, she has grown to understand that mothers the world over will sympathize with her current wish—that is, that there were some way to make Jordan grow up slower still. Just yesterday, she was toddling through the fields by the rented farmhouse, chasing the dragonflies that buzzed up and away from her feet. Just yesterday, Inej was too young for reminiscing.

"Did you…find anything?" Alby asks hesitantly. He isn't quite meeting her eyes, but he hasn't in the few days since they met. Inej is trying to regret the fact that she frightens him, but some small and stubborn part of her is still clinging to the name Kaz called her so long ago: *dangerous.* Danger, for her, is the only reliable kind of safety.

Jordan knocks her elbow into Alby's arm. "It's Inej, of course she did." He grimaces and rubs the spot, but doesn't look seriously bothered. There's something jarring about how comfortable they are together—how much has grown between them without her knowing? It has always been her job to know anything she needs to. It isn't that she doesn't want Jordan to have privacy, but it makes her uneasy to be aware that there are secrets being kept from her.

"It's still weird that you use their first names," Alby mutters. Inej isn't sure she's supposed to have heard this, but she can hear a conversation with perfect clarity from yards and yards above, or over the roar of waves. He has no reason to know that, of course.

"It's only weird to you," Jordan points out with a shrug. "That's just how things are." Looking to Inej, she nudges her mug of what smells like hot cocoa and says, "So?"

Inej lays her hands flat on the table, giving Alby a quick glance. She knows that what she has to say might seem overly blunt to him, but she's grown less able and inclined to mince words over the years. Perhaps she's just becoming more like Kaz. "Koen didn't sign to be studied by the medical students," she says quietly, drawing an imaginary line from one hand to the other as she explains. "His family paid for his body to be prepared at the morgue, where it was moved yesterday." *It.* She supposes she could say *he* , but if what little Kaz has said to her is any indication, it'll be better for Alby to separate the body from the boy he knew.

"And…he's still there?" That said, she isn't going to correct Alby. He has the luxury of being able to process his grief. Who is she to criticize how he does it?

"Yes. The *stadwatch* are saying it was wise of you to go to them as soon as you found him, since it allowed the evidence to go undisturbed." How, then, Inej ended up with the crow's feather in her pocket and the news in her ear before the *stadwatch* ever arrived on the scene is *quite* a mystery.

"What else would they expect? Noble upstanding citizen that you are," Jordan adds, smirking as she bumps her shoulder against Alby's. He gives a very brave but ultimately pitiful attempt at a smile.

"They've been collecting student witness records for most of the day," Inej adds, pausing when a waitress sets her spiced tea down in front of her. The Crow and Cup has become known as one of the only establishments outside of Little Ravka with the authentic Suli recipe, though how they got it is a puzzle even to Inej herself. She's certain it's one that she could solve, but sometimes she likes to allow Kaz his dramatic gestures—he always seems so pleased with himself, and she likes to see the face that he makes, the barely-suppressed upturn of his lips.

"Thank you, Ria," she says, giving a small smile to the waitress, one of her rescues. The dark-haired girl bows her head before slipping away to her place behind the counter. Ria was estranged from her family and had no desire to return to them, so Inej and her crew found a job for her here instead. Inej would like to say that why anyone would choose to live in Ketterdam is beyond her, but, well, here she is.

Inej turns her attention back to the two teenagers in front of her. Alby is putting on a brave face, but he doesn't have the practice at it that she is so familiar with—his chin is jutted a bit too high, mouth strung in too tight of a line—and for a moment Inej can't decide if the ache in her chest is jealousy or relief.

Jordan, for her part, is all anticipation, every line of her frame straining forward for permission to take flight. "So, someone should sneak in after hours and copy their records."

Inej gives a short nod. "But if we want to stay ahead of them, we also need eyes on the morgue if we want to know autopsy results before the *stadwatch* do."

Alby's expression twists, almost crumples. "He was shot in the back. It isn't like it's hard to tell." For all the force he puts behind the statement, his voice shakes, barely firm enough not to break under its own strength.

Inej recognizes the expression that darts across Jordan's face as well as she knows the sound of her own pulse; the hesitation, the desire to help but uncertainty as to how. The pain of carrying a care that has grown heavy and being unable to set it down.

Unfortunately, Jordan is like her father enough that her answer to this problem is to act, preferably to escape. "I can go to the morgue. Get any information they find there before it's sent out in the morning."

"No," Inej and Alby say at the same time. Alby pales, but Inej finds herself almost amused. He must not yet be familiar with the unique battle that is telling Jordan she can't do something—rather like trying to leash a tornado.

Inej sees the dust being kicked up now in the downturn of her daughter's expression. "And why not?" Jordan demands, rather too loudly for the discussion they're having.

Inej decides to spare Alby. "Because I'm going."

Jordan crosses her arms, leans back in her seat. She doesn't glare, but instead wears a bored, brows-raised expression that is a miniature mirror of Kaz. "That's not an answer and you know it."

Alby seems to have forgotten his protest in the shock of seeing Jordan argue outright with her parent, so Inej steps in. "It's an answer and a good one. The Warehouse district is one of the most secure places in the city."

"And the *stadwatch* offices aren't?"

Inej knows she's grasping for reasons to refuse, somewhat, since she won't say the real one—certainly not in front of Alby, maybe not at all. Something in her gut says that the idea of sending Jordan into a place filled with decay, alone, would not go over well with Kaz. A younger version of her may have objected, fought against it for being illogical or a detriment to the plan, but after having come so far, she's willing to make any remaining concessions to their respective weaknesses. Were West Stave something more than the ashes of its former glory, she wouldn't send Jordan there, either.

"They're certainly more straightforward to get into," is the answer she settles on. "Besides, *meja,* you still have a job. Is it so important which one?"

Jordan is sulking, but it's clear that most of the fight has gone out of her. "Yes. I don't see why you can't trust me with something like that."

Alby starts to say something, but recoils when Jordan turns to look at him. He glances back and forth between her and Inej, then slowly says, "It—it seems like they trust you a lot. I mean. I haven't…been here, so I don't know how it usually is, but…" His eyes flicker between them again, and Inej has to suppress a smile. Frightened though he seems, Alby is strong indeed to step in between both Rietveld women. She has to admit, he's growing on her.

For all that Inej is expecting Jordan to argue, she hesitates, then gives an exasperated sigh. Looking at Inej with an undeniable shadow of a smile, she says, “I guess.”

Inej merely raises her eyebrows in Alby’s direction. “We’re going to have to keep you around.”

Chapter End Notes

this chapter isn't one of my favorites, and I know it's kinda short, but you all deserve an update, so. I hope it at least holds you over until next week <3

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby has a rather stressful morning. The family hatches a plan.

Chapter Notes

apologies for the week off! for those of you who don't follow me on Instagram, life and the necessity of having an actual plot kicked me quite definitively down, and then I spent most of friday in the car. so! I have returned, and as a peace offering, I have some shout-outs for you~

maiden_of_crows, it's as necessary to Inej as it is to us to have certain touchstones like that, things that don't change.

SilvervFirefly, while I do love analysis, sometimes those family feels just hit the spot more than anything else <3

Bisexual_Pretzel, the time that has passed in the fic and IRL definitely messes with me. I even find myself seeing the characters differently as *I* have aged in relation to them.

jzmn8r, I too am excited to see how all of these relationships progress :D

Lunarmoo, Inej is an observer at heart, so she's a great PoV character for scenes like this.

GNM_dreaming_girl, I *loved* this analysis of Jordan. She will always be my baby in a way, no matter how much she grows up, hehe.

Pipperdoo, this is one of my favorite parts of my routine too :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With his dormitory, well, out of commission, Alby has been staying at the Ostrich, a small and modest inn near the University. While he’s temporarily exempt from classes, Jordan has decided she has her own lessons to teach him; some days, he’ll wake up to a note on his windowsill, but other days, he’ll wake up to the presence of Jordan herself.

Today is one of those days. He’s barely cracked his eyes open before he hears, “Think fast”, and sits up just in time to put his face squarely in the path of something that is small,

roundish, and smells like bread when it smacks him in the nose. This sends him right back down again.

Somewhere in the black void that is his room outside of his closed eyelids, Jordan's voice says, "Think faster."

"I'm having lots of thoughts about pushing you out that window," Alby says, throwing an arm over his eyes. "And let me tell you, they are *sprinting.* "

He doesn't know how, but he can *hear* Jordan pouting. The silence has a distinctly petulant tone to it. Alby remains unrepentant; the part of him closest to his injured nose thinks that she deserves this. The rest of him, however, is weak-willed in the face of the force that is Jordan, and he eventually lifts his arm away from his face with a necessary amount of groaning. "What."

He blinks, and Jordan comes into focus, a shape in black and red, wool and leather, blurry at first then glowing in clarity with the pale sun behind her. "You wouldn't."

Alby lets his head drop rather dramatically to the side, mostly so that Jordan is hit with the full force of his raised eyebrows. He has spent enough time around her that he could teach a masterclass in skeptical expressions.

Jordan crosses her arms. "You couldn't push me down from here if you tried."

Alby rolls his head back to the center of his pillow and shoves the heels of his palms against his shut eyes until silver spots start floating across his vision (or lack thereof). He needs coffee. He needs to not be in this situation to start with. But that thought is sure to kick off the avalanche from annoyed to depressed, so he shuffles it away from the cliff's edge. "How do you know?"

"Because you can't throw a punch and I could knock you over with one hand." Privately, Alby thinks that it would require much less for Jordan to take him out—one smile from her in the proper lighting would be more than sufficient. He probably doesn't want to put that weapon in her hands, though.

"Actually, now that I say that…" Jordan is using her I-just-had-a-brilliant-idea voice, which Alby doesn't like, because her brilliant ideas tend to endanger his health and/or sanity. "You should really learn to fight."

Alby blinks. Then blinks again. Most of the sleepiness is cleared from his eyes by this point, but he still wants to be certain that he's perceiving what he thinks he is. "Ehm. Why?" He isn't entirely confident in his ability to hold his own against a particularly spirited songbird. This fact, now that he considers it, might be exactly why Jordan has decided to teach him, but he worries that she is vastly overestimating how much he can learn.

Jordan hops off of the windowsill and stands up straight, which, Alby has come to learn, can be interpreted as: she means business. Again, usually the Alby-endangering kind.

"Punch me," she says, hands on hips, dead serious.

Alby sits all the way up to make sure, but yes—his girlfriend is standing in the center of the rough, wood-paneled floor, expression set in firm lines like mortared brick, inviting him to punch her.

“I’m not going to hit you.”

The stony expression collapses, and Jordan rolls her eyes quite spectacularly. “After everything, you don’t think I can take it?”

“What? No, I just—I’m not—” Alby swallows, feels his Adam’s apple bob against his throat. He’s certain that the tips of his ears must look sunburnt, judging from how warm they’ve gotten. “I don’t want to hit you.” He can’t believe that he actually has to explain this.

“Oh, you won’t.” Jordan smirks. “You’ll try, that’s all.”

“I think your da might kill me. I’m sort of surprised he hasn’t already.”

“Well, someone is trying to make you think that he tried,” says Jordan, with the tone that one might use to comment on an unusual spell of rain (not that there is any such thing in Ketterdam).

The avalanche threatens once again. Alby is too tired for this. He gives her a look that says as much.

The dance of knowing when to back off has never been one of Jordan’s favorites, but she adjusts to this change in step with relative grace. “Look, here, just—say I’m coming at you. What do you do?”

Alby pushes the quilt off of his legs. Even though it’s clear that Jordan doesn’t mind, he’s slightly embarrassed to still be in his nightclothes (green-and-white-striped shirt with a chipped button, though the buttons are otherwise blessedly intact; it once had a matching pair of pants to go with it, but an oddly distributed growth spurt had made them too short in the ankles, so the pants he wears now are an uninteresting lightish gray). “Is this *you* you, or just someone?”

“Just someone.” Jordan flips her braid over her shoulder. “ *I* would never do such a thing, me being the nice person that I am.”

Alby looks around the room, at the evidence of his own awake-ness. “Nice?”

“I brought you a muffin,” she says, making pleading eyes at him.

“Where—?” Alby takes a second look around the room, and this time spots the muffin—rather, the projectile that injured his nose, which is now depositing copious amounts of crumbs on his sheets. “Ah. *Thanks.* ”

“But you don’t get to eat it until we’re done training!” Jordan lunges forward before he has time to do anything about it—not that there’s anything he *could’ve* done—and grabs Alby by the arm, yanking him up and out of bed. She backs up a few steps while Alby stumbles and

attempts to balance. “Okay. Now. Back to the part where I’m *someone* coming after you. What do you do?”

Alby’s arms flop rather despondently to his sides. It doesn’t help that he’s barefoot and the floor is rough enough that he is seriously concerned about splinters. “....Run?”

“Al- *by.* ” She drags out the second syllable for what is really an unnecessary amount of time. “New rule. You can’t run.” She steps back into what Alby assumes is a fighting stance, knees slightly bent, feet creating a broad base that looks as if it’ll allow her to shift without actually moving much. He tries to copy her, fairly sure that he’s doing it wrong.

“All right, then…” It looks as if Jordan is guarding her left side a little less than her right. Now, Alby has never been in so much as a schoolyard fight, seeing as he was tutored at home, and most of what his father taught him was last-ditch and fatal—‘Here’s how to take down someone much bigger than you’, dirty and desperate, that sort of thing. He can’t help but wonder if he’ll really get the chance to use more than that, in this hypothetical situation. Still, he attempts to take a swing towards the left side of her face.

One second he’s losing sight of his fist, and the next his legs are no longer holding him up. Jordan moves so fast that he can’t even tell how she managed to destroy his balance, and she catches him before he hits the ground, holding him in a dip as if they’re dancing.

Conceptually, Alby has long been aware of how strong she is, but this is something different altogether. He can *feel* it in the splay of her fingers against his back, the upward pull against his hip where her other hand is holding him up. He can see it in the slight lines of tension around her eyes, deep and glittering with what must be reflections but look like they’re alit from within. She gives a crooked smile, and Alby lets out a sort of shaky gasp-laugh. He should probably say something, or lift his head that last little bit…

“You should’ve let him fall.”

Alby flinches and manages to flop out of Jordan’s arms like a fish, landing flat on his back in a similarly piscine fashion and getting the air knocked from his lungs. When he looks up, coughing and gasping, Jordan’s mother—Inej—is sitting in the window, the slight tilt of a smile on her face.

Alby lets his head flop back down to the floor, defeated. “Does no one in your family use the door?”

A scrape, a thud. “I do.”

Alby shuts his eyes. He doesn’t need to see to recognize the stony grit of that voice. And maybe if he doesn’t look, this will all just go away.

“Did you find something?” Jordan asks. Alby stares at the ceiling and pretends he does not exist. There’s an interesting chip where the beams are exposed in one corner.

“Well, it’s unlikely that any of the gangs were connected to this,” says Inej’s voice from somewhere outside of his ceiling-view, “since Koen had no gang affiliations or debts.”

“We all have debts to pay,” says Jordan’s father, tone dark and grating. Alby can see one shoe and the tip of the crow-headed cane if he turns his head a little.

“ *Anyway* ,” says Jordan, and he can *hear* her rolling her eyes, “you don’t know about any secret gambling habits or anything, right?”

Alby sits up, feeling mostly able to breathe again. “No.” He coughs. “Koen would never touch the Staves. I don’t think he even left campus, really. I don’t know if I’ll ever understand people who spend their whole lives afraid like that, but…that’s how he was, so.” He forces himself to reign in the frustration in his voice; there’s no point in bitterness with a boy who’s no longer here, and he can only suppose that Koen lived the life he wanted to live. It’s just… it was such a small life. He could’ve had the chance to learn, as Alby has, how wonderful and kaleidoscopic and sprawling the world can be. But he didn’t take it until it was too late.

“Keep your anger for the dead,” says Dirtyhands, walking over towards the window, each step punctuated with the impact of his cane. When he stops, his silhouette is carved by a rim of silver, filtered daylight. “If you don’t blame them, you’ll blame yourself.”

Inej hums. “Some of us manage to do both, Kaz.” Alby gets the feeling from the look on her face that the *us* is more of a *you* .

Jordan flings a hand up in the air. “You forgot option three,” she crows. “Blame someone else and plot a course of vengeance.”

“Some of us can do all *three* ,” her mother says with a brief flick of her eyes at Brekker.

“I thought the vengeance thing is what we were doing,” says Alby. He tries to sound casual about it—no one who knows him would ever describe him as the bloodthirsty type—but he’d be lying if he said he doesn’t want the person who killed Koen to *hurt.* And, preferably, he’d like to be the one doing the hurting.

He refuses to spend the rest of his life afraid. Not after what it did to his da. *We are not our parents.* He wonders if that statement means freedom to Jordan like it does to him—her parents are creatures of shadow, but is that shadow a thing that buries her, or a legacy she’s proud to bear? For once, Alby knows what he feels. So even if they don’t catch whoever did this, he isn’t running.

That’s the risk we run when we make ourselves royal. Well, Alby’s had enough of being a prince, an heirloom in a glass case. He has no interest in being king. He’ll play the knight instead—slay the dragon, make it home alive. He’d much prefer the weight of a sword to the weight of a crown.

“We will be,” says Brekker, “if you can give us answers.” He raps his cane against the floor once. Alby pities the downstairs neighbors.

“What else do you need him to tell you?” asks Jordan. Her hands are settled firmly on her hips once again, eyes dark with a glint of defiance.

“Anything I ask for,” Dirtyhands replies, his mouth set in a grim slash. Standing next to Inej where she sits in the window, both of them outlined in gray light and painted in shadow, he completes a formidable pair. Alby is more than a little afraid, which probably doesn’t help this whole process.

Jordan seems unfazed, as per usual. She flings herself onto the bed, which causes the springs to squeal loudly enough that Alby winces. “Then ask away.”

She’s on my bed she’s on my bed she’s on my—

This is probably fine. Alby gives a thumbs-up with what he thinks is an impressive amount of gusto, considering that he’s sitting on the floor in his pajamas, in front of his girlfriend’s murderous parents, who are simultaneously the coolest-looking and most terrifying people he has ever met. Also Dirtyhands and some kind of pirate-spy-ghost. He doesn’t even feel *aesthetically* adequate to fit in with this family. Maybe he should invest in some stylized weapons, and wear more black. That would probably just make him look like a lit match, though.

“So, your friend liked to stay out of trouble,” Inej muses, crossing one leg neatly over the other. “But you think whoever stuck him was after *you* . So, what about you?” Her gaze really is unnerving. Alby has half a mind to ask why she’s questioning him when she can clearly see into his soul.

“Besides the obvious,” Jordan adds helpfully, bouncing.

“Well…there’s my,” Alby coughs and looks away from the window, “my da. But I assume that’s what you’re calling the obvious. I’ve stayed away from the Staves,” *because he told me to,* “so the only other thing I can think of is, well…” He looks towards the bed. “Jordan. But no one is supposed to know about her, so…”

He can’t read the silence that follows; Jordan’s parents are sharing a look in the way that they do, and Jordan herself is chewing the inside of her cheek. At last, her da looks towards her, drawing out her name long as if he’s dragging it over gravel. “Jordan?”

“Well…” She coils the end of her braid around her finger. “There’s the man from the Crow and Cup. The one with the wilted rose tattoo.”

“Weren’t you and the little spiders tailing him?” Inej questions with an arch of her brow.

“We were, but…we lost him.” Jordan slumps. “He’s the only one I know of who’s figured out about me. But he’s probably out of the city by now.”

“Not necessarily.” Dirtyhands cocks his head to one side, eyes black in the shadow that the window casts. “This may not be personal. Our man didn’t break in like someone with a grudge.”

Alby wonders if Jordan knows that she is mirroring her father’s expression down to the head tilt. “So you think he was being paid, and it has nothing to do with me?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that.” Brekker’s fingertips drum against the head of his cane. “That tattoo isn’t a gang mark, or from any of the pleasure houses still standing. But everyone in the Barrel has a mark. Scars, brands, tattoos. The lucky ones choose their marks. The rest of the poor skivs get cut by the hand they’re dealt.”

“You think it’s an assassin’s mark,” Jordan says. How is she still so calm about all of this? How is this the girl who let him cling to her like a lifeline at the Crow Club, who answered and permitted his tears with her own?

“Wait—assassin?” Alby clambers to his feet. “But that doesn’t make any sense. If he’s after me because I’m—we—because of Jordan, why not just go right for her?”

“Sometimes,” says Inej, her voice like the hiss of velvet, “the people we love are used as a lure. Especially when those people are secrets.”

“If not a lure, then a lever,” Brekker adds. They’re looking at each other again in the way that they do. But Alby isn’t stupid. He saw his father’s face at the sight of that Crow Club poster. He’s read every single anxious letter, sliding from demanding to pleading that he get out of this city. He remembers what Jordan said— *In order to stay on top of the pile, you have to stay at least a little bit scared—* but this is more than “a little bit”. This is more than an avoidance of some old nemesis, some imagined downfall. What Alby is seeing, what he’s spent his whole life seeing, are the aftershocks of something very, very real.

If not a lure, than a lever. He doesn’t remember why they moved out of the city. But he’s willing to bet that Kaz Brekker does.

“But if he’s an assassin,” Jordan says, “someone would’ve had to hire him. And hire him to frame *you* .”

Alby isn’t sure what he expects to happen next, but it’s not for Jordan’s father to pin that black gaze right on him, locking their eyes. And in that moment, he has a realization that’s more frightening than anything that has happened so far—they’re sharing the same thought.

“I have a guess,” says Brekker, with a cruel and crooked smile. “But to make it an educated one, we need a name.”

“Anything you need,” says Alby, and he doesn’t know if the thing that’s risen up in his chest is anger or confidence or sheer madness, but suddenly it’s like there’s extra air in his lungs. He doesn’t look away from Dirtyhands’ eyes. “Anything to find him. And when we do, I’ll be ready.”

He turns to Jordan, spreads his arms wide, makes himself an open target. “Let’s go again. As many times as it takes.”

Chapter End Notes

who needs plot when you have symbolism and family banter, right?

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej pay Jesper a visit. Jordan finds a clue.

Chapter Notes

I was very happy to see everyone enjoying the alby content last chapter! he's my little guy and I love him a lot, hehe. no big announcements or anything this week, so let's get right into your shout-outs~

always_reading2027, I love looking at those two from another set of eyes; internally, they're so complex, but externally, they're mostly just intimidating.

possumenjoyer, poor alby feels very behind when it comes to drama.

Lunarmoo, I do enjoy throwing in the little details about Jordan that make her both her own person and very much her parents' daughter.

Bisexual_Pretzel, with the drama and angst in this fic, my opportunities to write banter are limited, but I seize them whenever I get the chance (as evidenced by this chapter).

JustaBoredFrog, we can agree on loving alby, hehe. he's great <3

jzmn8r, poor alby is going through a lot right now, even *without* having to navigate this insane family dynamic, lol.

Heiress_Kyr, more has arrived! I'm still slightly in awe of you for finishing this monstrosity in half a day.

thephonyqueenofengland, you may not be the only one who has that theory...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every time Kaz visits the Van Eck manor, they've acquired yet another horrible new vase. The latest one greets him at the kitchen door in lieu of an irritated maid, and it is such a disarming shade of orange that Kaz would, frankly, prefer the maid. Alas, she is only there to let in guests who are entering the house properly.

"There are worse things they could've spend their money on," Inej muses from behind him as he pockets his lockpicks. When Kaz glances over his shoulder, she is observing the vase—

which is nearly her height—poised with all the grace of a figure ready to be drawn. Kaz himself has no skill for sketching, but sometimes he wonders what Wylan would make of it; he often feels that if he could freeze her in the middle of a movement, even then she would be art.

He doesn't respond, but rather gives the vase a baleful look as he moves through the kitchen and into the dining room by way of the Kerch-style door. He's almost disappointed when Jesper, seated alone at the table, looks up from the bit of metal he's toying with like putty and appears supremely unsurprised.

His hands keep moving as he speaks, eyes bright with interest. "You *can* come in the front, you know."

"Not until you change those locks like I told you to," Kaz replies, briefly surveying the dining room. The table is not set for a meal, but rather covered with a scattering of metal pieces and parts, alongside loose-leaf documents and an empty beaker or two.

Jesper goes on as if he hasn't heard. He's probably never going to listen about the locks, but that doesn't stop Kaz from trying. "At least you're being decent enough to bring one of my favorite guests."

"You know better than to accuse me of decency," says Kaz, inviting himself to a seat at the table and resting his cane against his lap. As autumn creeps on, the chills are setting in early, and the winter ache is baring its teeth again; he'll take the excuse to not stay standing.

"Lovely to see you too," says Jesper. "It really is lovely to see *you*, Inej. How's the high seas?"

"Emptier of slavers," she replies, with a proud sliver of a smile. She glances down at Kaz and sighs before taking a seat beside him, as he'd known she would—he has successfully been a poor influence on her manners. Then again, she *is* a Crow.

They don't have any manners. At least, now, he can be amused with himself for the way he was then.

"That's our Inej," says Jesper, flashing a white-toothed smile. "What are they calling you now? The Reaper of Ships? The Scourge of the Seas?"

"Sankta of the Sea is the other side of that particular coin," says Kaz, with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk. He hears Inej give the quiet huff that she does when she thinks he's being sacreligious, and he usually is, but he really does believe this.

Jesper grins and twirls the bit of metal—once a gearwheel, Kaz suspects—over his knuckles. "All hail. Wylan is in his office, by the way, though I have this suspicion that he's just pretending to work." He flips the metal piece up and catches it. "Now, where's my favorite protegé?"

Inej says, "She's your only protegé," at the same time that Kaz says, "She isn't your protegé."

“I forgot how much fun it is when neither of you know how to answer questions,” says Jesper, with what is really an excessive amount of fondness in his voice.

Kaz would like to retort that he, too, had forgotten Jesper’s inability to get to the point, but his memory has yet to fail him about anything.

“Either at the Ostritch, or out following Kerstan around,” says Inej, folding her hands neatly on the polished tabletop. “Ever since we returned, she wants to know all there is about being a medik. It reminds me of the way that I was with Specht after the Ice Court.”

“Wait.” Jesper doesn’t go still, because he never does, but his movements grow slower. His brow furrows, but his smile never fades. “The Ostrich? Like that inn near the University that my da stayed at during the sugar scam? Unless there’s another Ostrich that’s somehow more exciting.”

Had Kaz answered the question, he would’ve avoided the issue of Alby Rollins altogether—despite the fact that Rollins’ son is inextricable from their reason for visiting. But Inej slides smoothly past it as she is so skilled at doing, giving the merest lift of her shoulders. “It’s a long story, and one I’m certain you will hear eventually.” Kaz doesn’t miss the look that she angles in his direction. “But I suppose we should get to why we’re here.”

Jesper sighs and leans back in his chair, stretching and looking briefly ridiculous with his long limbs and overly-fluffed cravat. “It can never just be that you miss us, can it? Well, Inej, since you’re here and not in danger, I’m afraid crime is off the table.”

Kaz quietly lifts up his walking stick and sets it on the tabletop.

Inej is nearly as skilled at restraining her expressions as he is, so he knows that the smile pressed between her lips, the laugh in her eyes, are for his benefit. “You won’t be committing. Or acting as accessories. Or really even conspiring.”

“That’s a shame,” says Jesper with a crooked, easy smile. “I’ve been told I make quite the glamorous accessory.”

“Speaking of which,” Kaz cuts in, “while being paraded around at merchers’ dinners and socials, have you ever chanced to meet one Eline de Vries?”

Jesper sets down the once-gearwheel, and Kaz sees the shift in his expression that means they’ve got him hooked. That face has been the same since they were barely sixteen—a subtler smile than Jesper ever wears on purpose, a spark like flint in his eyes, a tilt of his brow, a slight lean forward. It doesn’t matter what he says. He’s in.

And, though Kaz would be stripped and locked up in the Ice Court again before he’d admit it, that’s one of the reasons they’re here. Because, after everything, he relies on Jesper. Because he knows that he can.

Maybe he really is getting sentimental—or just losing his touch. He never expected to live long enough to have those sorts of worries. Inej has been commenting on the gray threading

in at his temples, and the only saving grace there is that she likes it. His da was fully silver by 40, if Kaz remembers right. He wonders if Jordie might have been, too.

“Her husband is the one who kicked up a fuss over Wy’s proposal with the indenture contracts,” says Jesper, almost like it’s a question. He drums his fingers against the tabletop. “But yes, I’ve met her. If making conversation was competitive, she’d have a roomful of trophies.”

“That doesn’t mean she said anything that matters,” Inej muses, her chin propped on one hand.

“You’ve gotten so cynical,” Jesper teases. “Can’t imagine where you wouId’ve gotten that from.”

It might not kill him to catch up the way that most old friends do, but something in Kaz insists that this must be reined in. “So you’ve met,” he prompts, rather impatiently.

“Now, *you,* Kaz, are lucky that conversation skills aren’t a competition,” Jesper says, still grinning. Off Kaz’s glare, which they both know is lacking any real malice, Jesper continues, “Fine, fine, I’ll bite. Yes, I’ve talked to her. I was doing my part like a good socialite, but I think she was hiding from dear Willem by the punchbowl.”

Just as he’d suspected. While he, Inej, and Jordan have been sorting through everywhere from the morgue to the *stadwatch* offices, the little spiders have been spinning their webs, and the juiciest fly they’ve managed to catch is one Willem de Vries. He’s the Merchant Council’s version of old guard, and his only purpose seems to be to act as a roadblock for anything new or useful. He is also married to a woman far too young and too educated for him, which is the key as far as Kaz is concerned. Exactly the sort of woman who might want to hire an assassin.

Exactly the sort of woman who may have before, according to the *stadwatch* records.

“He sounds charming,” Inej muses. There’s a dry humor in her voice, but Kaz feels his hackles rise; even if he never stooped to it himself, de Vries is exactly the kind of man who would have used and discarded her at the Menagerie.

“You have no idea,” Jesper replies, folding his arms behind his head. “Wy can’t stand him. It’s a miracle that we still got the contract regulations through. I’d like to take partial credit for my schmoozing abilities.”

Inej reaches across the table to lay her hand over his. The difference in size is, frankly, dramatic. “I cannot express how grateful I am that you did.”

She has always been so sincere. There is something in her that refuses to bend, and Kaz wonders if she has thought, as he once did, that it would mean she had to break instead. But she proved him wrong—him and everyone else. It isn’t really a surprise.

“You don’t have to,” says Jesper, who has grown almost jarringly more comfortable with sincerity over the years. His smile is different than it was a moment ago, something softer

around the edges of his eyes. “I know. And I’ll pass the message on.”

“Back to de Vries,” Kaz says. Jesper gives him an elaborate, exasperated look, but to his view, the moment has run its course. “Or, rather, his wife. Lovely Eline. No one knows what happened to her last husband. Case went cold.”

Kaz happens to know, however, that the only suspect was a man with a wilted rose tattoo.

Jesper’s nodding slows down. He’s catching on. “Uh- *huh.* ”

Kaz gives a crooked grin. This never quite gets old. “Think she hates de Vries, or loves his fat will, enough to hire a hitman?”

“If she does, I’m not going to stop her,” Jesper says, straightening his striped collar— *why are they even made in that pattern* —with a truly unnecessary amount of flounce. “But if I were her, I would. His will isn’t just rich, it’s probably easy to milk. What I’ve read of his documentation is really poorly formatted.” He shrugs. “I don’t know how he’s gotten this far without a basic grasp of law.”

“Of course you do,” says Kaz with something like a laugh. “His father took a few steps along the path, and *his* father before him. Why do you think men like de Vries can’t stand change? They’re sitting pretty at the end of a legacy. Why shake that up?”

That’s the thing the ones with real money have that the criminals don’t, no matter how rich they get. Legacy. Hardly anyone survives the Barrel long enough to have an heir, and even if they do, what do they have that can be passed on? What do they have to inherit, other than spite and shame? Maybe that’s what Rollins was trying to do with his Kaelish Prince, but he’s proof that there are no dynasties in the Barrel. There are no real kings.

That’s why Kaz’s vengeance was always going to be his legacy. The things he built, the things he burned. *Brick by brick.* But that didn’t make anyone remember his brother’s name, did it? Jordie’s memory won’t outlive him any more than anything else.

But now he has something that would.

Now Jordan’s name, that name, will last after he’s gone. Whether it’s a hired bullet or another gang, or the harbor or sickness or an age he still doesn’t really expect to see, there will still be a Jordan Rietveld in the world. There will still be someone who knows Jordie’s story.

He spent so much of his life certain that to set aside his armor, to let anyone else see into the murky waters he rose from, would destroy him. To tear down Rollins’ empire, he had to be defended and alone, as invulnerable as he could be. Every weakness made a strength. But it was when he led someone else down to the docks and showed them his reflection, when he let a living hand pull him from the harbor—first Inej, then Jesper, and then Jordan herself—*that* was when he built something lasting.

The nearest thing he has to a brother now is a Grisha with a comfortable life. Jesper will be here, long after the day that Kaz can’t get back up anymore. And he’ll know. He’ll know Jordie’s name.

Because I called him by it. When I never meant to, when I didn't know why.

"It seems like you already have what you need," says Jesper, his hands coming to rest on the tabletop. There's still a smile in his eyes, but it's starting to sink into something uncertain and bemused. "Why come all the way out here to ask me what you already know?"

That's their cue to go. Kaz snaps up his cane and pushes the chair back rather unceremoniously.

"Don't tell me." Now Jesper is positively *beaming.* Kaz almost wishes he'd stayed confused, at least until they were out the door. "I was joking. You *did* actually miss us!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Kaz says, not breaking his stride towards the exit. He does, however, see Inej and Jesper share a knowing look, which. Well. It wasn't like he hadn't been expecting Jesper to figure it out. When he truly wants to avoid getting caught, he works much harder at it.

"Saints, Kaz." There's a scrape against the floor, and then Jesper is matching him with long, loping strides. "And here I thought you only cared about my value to the plan as a trophy husband."

"No you didn't," says Kaz, and he doesn't quite suppress a smile. He pauses at the kitchen door to look back over his shoulder. Inej and Jesper are standing just behind him, shoulder to shoulder—well, the top of her head to his shoulder—Inej in the Wraith's gray, Jesper in an eye-stabbing shade of violet. If he doesn't focus on the details, it's as if nothing has changed at all: the two of them at his back, the three of them plunging into yet another mission.

But now all three bear rings, though Inej's is tucked beneath her collar on a chain and Kaz's is only visible in the absence of his gloves. Now, Jesper is wearing the kind of velvet and trim that no one in the Barrel could afford. Now, Inej's hands are cracked and calloused from years at sea. Now, Jordan is waiting for them at home.

"No," says Jesper, and something in the lightness of his expression falters briefly. He swallows. "No, I guess I didn't."

"Saints' speed," says Inej. Kaz gives a nod. Then he pushes open the door, and they're gone.

<><><>

They're not halfway back to the Zelver district before Jordan slides down a drainpipe as they walk past, falling into step with the pair.

"Guess what I found," she says.

"A million *kruge* ," Kaz replies, a slight smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

He hears Inej chuckle softly and inclines his head towards her, raising an eyebrow in lieu of asking a verbal question.

She is walking on the canal side of the street, nearer to the water, footsteps making a perfect, even line. “You sound like such a father.”

Kaz shifts his gaze straight ahead and braces himself for what he’s about to say. Even after all these years, sometimes it feels easier to say something vulnerable or ridiculous or kind when he’s not looking at her. “Well. I am one.”

Jordan’s shoulder nudges up against his sleeve, on the side that’s not occupied with his cane —a question—and Kaz lifts his arm slightly so that she can wind hers around it. Between Jordan’s boundless energy and the slight hindrance to his stride, they keep pace surprisingly well.

“Out in public and everything,” Jordan says cheekily.

Well. If his theory is right, Pekka Rollins already knows about her, and the most he’s done is pull his son further and further away from her. Kaz might never admit it, for to do so would subject him to endless “told-you-so”s, but they did teach Jordan to fight for a reason. And, one day—closer than he or Inej has truly considered—none of them will have a choice anymore. She’ll be fending for herself. Maybe it’s better for her to have his reputation attached.

Out loud, however, he says, “You were going to tell us what you found.”

“But *you*— ” Jordan sighs noisily. “ *Fine.* First thing is, I got my hands on the *stadwatch* records from the student witnesses. Most of them are useless or made up for attention, but y’know who this one girl saw creeping around?”

“It wouldn’t be our rose-tattooed Ravkan, would it?” says Inej, stepping neatly around a bit of litter strewn between the cobblestones.

“It *would* ,” Jordan says triumphantly, bouncing in her stride and slightly jostling Kaz’s arm. Someone in the window of a nearby eatery gives them a strange look. “And y’know what I also got?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell us,” Kaz observes, leaning slightly more on his cane to guide himself down a small set of steps.

“I got into Eline de Vries’ mail,” says Jordan, pulling an envelope from the inside of her coat with her free hand. She waves it at nobody in particular. “She’s supposed to be meeting with him in two days to give him the payment. I guess it was too risky to send money and leave a trail.”

“She still left this one,” Inej observes, deftly lifting the envelope from Jordan’s hand and looking it over.

The architecture around them grows more modest as they enter the narrower streets of the Zelver district. Slender lampposts arch over the street, casting puddles of light in the dusty, dimming evening like fountains, and the houses are caped with tulip gardens and collared by neat white windowsills. It is such a kind and simple place for their murder of crows. Perhaps

too much so. But they haven’t been run off by its gentleness yet—quite the opposite, Kaz fears.

Flanked by his girls, he walks down the quiet, empty street, past white curtains with scalloped hems and doors engraved with delicate flowers, all of them concealing ordinary families who love one another so plainly. No wonder this place made the perfect illusion for two boys who’d lost their home.

Well. Look at him now. He’s made it his home, something real and true. Another small vengeance that arose from everything he feared would break him.

“I’m afraid Mrs. de Vries may have to miss her meeting,” he says, stopping in front of their blue front door. “Though our man will still be getting paid.”

Jordan releases his arm to skip up the steps and go inside, but Inej lingers beside him. He swaps his cane to the opposite side, expectant; a moment later, he feels the ridges of their knuckles brush, and then her hand is closed in his, strong and warm. So plain. So impossible, once.

Moving in answer to one another, they walk up the steps and into the house, taking their sweet and simple time.

Chapter End Notes

me to my beta reader/moral support/sister/inspiration for this fic: "I made the mistake of letting them talk to Jesper, and now I've written 900 words and all of it is banter."

also, we made it to 200K words. that's wild.

find me on tumblr @fairytalesofforever and instagram @fairytales_of_forever for some fic updates and soc thoughts

Alby/Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej shares a proverb. The scheme begins.

Chapter Notes

happy friday the thirteenth, everyone! may you be safe from bad luck and visited by many crows instead. I just posted a new fic (chapter one of the soulmate AU) the other day, and the link to that will be in the endnotes :D I already saw that some of you have gone from this fic to that one, and I hope you enjoyed it just as much! now, time for some spooky shout-outs~

Heiress_Kyr, Kaz is the opposite of colorblind. Color-sensitive?

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, I love the ways Jordan is like her parents just as much as I love the ways she is her own person.

jzmn8r, alexa play "some things never change" from frozen.

The_Wraiths_wifey, fear not, there is more jalby to come!

always_reading2027, I may or may not have written the "his girls" line with the full and complete knowledge that you all were going to *love* that one.

Lunarmoo, imagine how much nina would be bullying kaz about his hair *now*. she would probably agree with you about the dye thing.

GNM_dreaming_girl, what comes next has arrived! I hope you enjoy <3

Pipperdoo, on a more serious note, I do worry a lot about keeping the quality consistent, so this comment means a lot to me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The Crow and Cup,” Alby repeats, deadpan, feeling as if none of this is quite real. This is a feeling he’s been having and more and more recently. He looks up from the note he was just handed at the rest of the hotel room, which is once again populated by Jordan and her parents.

“I wasn’t surprised,” says Inej, who is sitting in the window beside Jordan, one shoulder leaned against the side of the frame. She draws her knee up to her chest in a smooth, liquid motion. “It was created as a respectable front for meetings, a new version of the parleys that the old guard used to have.”

“Useless, generally,” Dirtyhands puts in from his spot by the door, hands folded neatly over the head of his cane. “But not when they’re happening on neutral territory.”

“That’s why I had to kick out our assassin and the other guy,” Jordan explains. “Because they broke neutral territory. House rules say no actual violence.” Alby tries not to show how grateful he is for this. Jordan already knows how far in over his head he’s gotten, but he’d like for her parents to think of him as somewhat competent.

“His name is Urstal Orlov, though he works as the Thorn,” Jordan’s father says, his gaze sweeping over the rest of the room and landing on Alby. “As you read, he’s meant to be meeting Eline de Vries today to have a nice chat about killing her husband.”

“At the Crow and Cup,” Alby reiterates, feeling rather like a bug pinned in a case under the force of that stare.

“Such a quick study,” Brekker replies flatly. “I’m almost disappointed we have to stop them. But if she’s still in the market to pull off a hit after this, I’m sure the Dregs can supply someone.” He concludes this with a smile that Alby can easily imagine involving bloodstains. Or fangs.

Mostly to escape that black stare, he crosses the room to hand the note back to Jordan. He suspects that the brief brush of their fingertips as she takes it is not accidental. “So we’re taking the meeting instead.”

Brekker withdraws and consults his pocket watch. “In about half chime.” The watch isn’t the kind Alby knows most of the Barrel bosses carry—gem-studded and gaudy, with heavy fobs and thick chains. It’s a sleek, silver thing, polished to a perfect shine like the tips of his shoes and the head of his cane. All so different from the man he met at Zentsbridge, Alby can’t help thinking; that man was plainer, just as hard-edged but less sharp somehow. Just as solid, but less likely to cut.

He is the man from Zentsbridge, and he is Kaz Brekker, but Alby can't understand how those two are the same person. The only thing they seem united by is the central persona of Jordan's da. And maybe that's it—maybe she is what connects it all at the center.

“How do we—” Alby shifts his weight, uncertain, or maybe just aimless. “How do we make sure that Mrs. de Vries doesn’t get there first?” He can’t shake the feeling that he’s floating, dreaming. He’s going to snap out of this and Jordan will have a regular family, even though he’s known who her da is for a year and then some. He’s going to wake up, and Koen will be alive and well, watering his plants. He’ll get his jacket back.

“You leave that to us,” says Jordan, springing down from the windowsill and landing without so much of a creak of the floorboards. As she walks past him, she reaches up to ruffle his hair. “Don’t worry your pretty head about it.”

Alby isn't sure whether to be annoyed or flustered, so he finds himself mostly just looking confused, trying halfheartedly to smooth his hair down.

"We'll go in pairs," says Inej, her dark eyes as still as unstirred water. She has a way of being commanding without ever raising her voice, or even expanding her posture. She still has one knee drawn up to her chest, her chin resting neatly on top of it, and yet Alby feels immediately inclined to do as she says. The feeling only increases when she fixes him with an evaluating gaze. "Jordan, go with Kaz. Alby, you'll be with me."

Jordan stops halfway to the door and turns, arms folded. "Why do those have to be the pairs? You and Kaz have been working together for ages. And Alby and I make a good team." She takes a step closer to him as if this in any way proves her point.

Alby stands very still and returns to his previous strategy of pretending he does not exist. It's not such a difficult thing, these days.

"We're putting each of you with an adult," says Brekker, snapping his watch shut and pocketing it once again. His grating, gravel tone dares them to disagree.

Jordan being Jordan, she does. "Wh—but you were *both* doing stuff like this when you were my age! You never had an adult to watch you, or help you." She sets her hands on her hips, standing as if she is rooted to the spot.

Unstoppable force and immovable object, Alby thinks. *She's both.*

"Do you know how many times I wished that we did?" The voice that interjects belongs to Inej, and although her manner and tone haven't changed, Alby feels chastised and ashamed by proxy.

Jordan deflates slightly. She doesn't exactly agree, but she nods once and goes over to stand by her da.

"Meet us there," says Inej, and with that, she tips backwards out of the window and disappears from view.

Alby gives Jordan a helpless look.

"Take the stairs," she says with a wave of her hand. "It's fine. She'll wait." Then she pauses and tilts her head to one side, eyes on a point Alby can't see. "...Probably."

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Alby does, in fact, manage to catch up with her. He doesn't know the city well enough to be certain of the streets or the route, so he follows closely; Inej explains that they'll head west until they can hop a *gondel* that will take them most of the way to the Lid.

She's quiet as they walk, but Alby doesn't mind that. It's easier, in a way, to not have to act the role of himself and be allowed to just exist. For once, he doesn't feel hovered over or pressured to be anything but alive and present, which is tricky enough as it is. He just wishes

he could hear her footsteps; it's a bit too easy to forget that he's not alone. He doesn't need any more ghosts tracking his steps.

As they make their winding way out of the University district, passing buildings that gradually get taller and more austere, he swallows. "Is this going to…fix anything?"

Inej doesn't turn all the way to face him, but she looks in his direction. "Finding the man who killed your friend?" He can't read anything from her tone.

"Doing…whatever we're going to do, *when* we find him," Alby replies. He shoves his hands into his pockets, tracking the lines of cobblestone as they vanish under his feet. "I mean…it won't bring him back. Nothing will." He stops the last word short, feeling his throat close, knowing that this was all a terrible idea. He shouldn't have said anything. Or, at least not to her. Jordan has a chance of comprehending it, but her mother, the woman once called the Wraith…he can't get a read on her at all. She holds so much power, but it's so subtle, so quiet. And she must have killed before. He has no reason to think that she'll understand his plain and banal grief.

"No," she says, her eyes uplifted to the thick gray skies between the rows of buildings. "But what you do now isn't for him. It is for you."

Alby looks up like a startled animal. He doesn't know why she surprised him so much, except that he has no way of guessing what she's going to say or do. "What—what do you mean?"

Inej pauses, slows her steps. She's slightly ahead of him now, so he can't see her face; he can only guess at how much or how little it would give away. "There's a saying in Suli," she says, followed by a string of words he doesn't understand. They are smooth and curling words, all interlinked like a circle of prayer. "Grief is love without a place to land, we say. But it cannot fall forever. So you, the living, have to give it one."

Alby frowns, his shoulders hunching forward. "That's not a debt I chose to pay."

He's still looking at her back, but he hears her give a soft laugh. "Most of us never chose our debts."

There's a knot of anger in his chest, something that wants to demand of her, *What do you know about any of this?* She may be Jordan's mother, but who is she to tell him what to do about this feeling—a weight and an emptiness at once? It's unreasonable, he knows, but the bitterness is easier than facing that fact.

"I never said a true goodbye to my father," she says, and although it feels abrupt to Alby, it probably isn't in actuality. He can see from the tilt of her head that she's looking up again. "I don't know that Kaz would have minded. He'd rather just let go." She looks to the side, almost over her shoulder at him. Alby feels seen, regardless. "We were three days out of port when the Saints took him. It was more than a week before I got the letter."

"I'm…sorry," says Alby, slowly, and he knows that he sounds only half as uncertain as he feels. It's as if she read his mind. He should be embarrassed about his earlier frustration,

probably, but mostly he's too weary to summon even shame.

Inej shakes her head, gently. "It was not the first time I lost him. Either of them. I was taken from them when I was young, younger than you are now. Younger than Jordan." For the first time, he notices a change in her voice; it's hollow, wistful almost, not quite accomplishing the job of sounding resolute.

He thinks of what she said before.

You never had an adult to watch you or help you.

Do you know how many times I wished that we did?

He considers. *Most of us never chose our debts.*

He understands, but doesn't want to.

"What did you do?" he asks quietly, after a silence that takes its time to fade. "How did you…give it a place to land?"

"Well," she says, and Alby sees her shoulders roll back, "you can't take revenge on sickness. Though there are those who have tried." There's a strange amusement, almost fondness, in her voice that he doesn't understand. "I should say that I gave the leftover love to my family. And, in part, I did." Once again, she looks back—not quite at him, but enough that he feels seen. Maybe even understood. "But that was not the first thing. The first thing I did was find a slaver ship's captain and carve open his chest. He bled out on the deck of his ship. I don't know if my father would approve of my bloodstained hands as an offering, but that—that was for me."

Her pace has slowed enough that she's stopped entirely, eyes an a point too far away for Alby to find. He steps up beside her.

He shouldn't be ashamed of being selfish. It's not a thing that he was ever taught, and he knows the kind of man his father is. But it still feels…strange, when it comes to Koen. Especially when he can't shake the sense that there's something he could've done, should've done. For all he knows, it was meant to be him, shot in his room, staining the rug, a crow's feather tucked into his green jacket. What right does he have to do anything for himself? Shouldn't this all be *for* Koen, to make up for the fact that he survived? Isn't *that* his debt?

Inej turns to look at him, and there is a kindness in her expression that Alby finds himself completely unprepared for. It isn't a soft or gentle thing. It's not without its repercussions. But it feels safer than any kind of pity ever has. "Do what you need," she says. "If you feel a debt to your friend, pay it. But then, set it down. Let it land."

I can't, Alby thinks. *I'm not brave enough. I'm afraid to let go.* He looks away, at anything but her face. *This all I have left of him.*

He doesn't have the courage that Jordan does, that her parents do. He doesn't have their strength. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't run from this fight, but he can't say as

much for what comes after.

As they walk to the canal, to the waiting *gondel* , Inej stays by his shoulder, her silence carrying that same, almost harsh sort of kindness. Alby is glad she doesn't try to speak. He doesn't know what else to say.

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Inej remains in the lead as they walk through the door of the Crow and Cup; while Alby has described himself as insignificant in his last encounter with their mark, she still wants to avoid any chance that he'll be recognized. While he isn't exactly hidden behind her, he is veiled by misdirection, a trick of guiding attention that Kaz taught her. It's one of the things he later told her that he learned from the street magicians on East Stave and turned to his own use.

She spots Urstal Orlov immediately, but allows her eyes to slide over him as if she never noticed. Her gaze is also half-hidden from the side by the scarf her mother gave her, which she draped over her hair before they entered the coffeehouse. She has little confidence that Alby is as good of an actor, but hopefully she's shielding him well enough for that not to matter.

She chances a look back at him; though he's wearing an expression she has never seen on his face—eyes narrowed, jaw tight—it somehow seems familiar. Then she realizes: Alby is angry, and it makes him look like his father.

It's been an easy thing to forget, while the four of them sit and scheme in a hotel room, but the reminder is good for her: this is still Pekka Rollins' son. This is still the boy she left a crow beside before she threatened to carve out his father's heart. She has not forgotten why.

Still, they're too deep into this to back out and let him face his own problems, and besides, she has to wonder what Wylan would say. Wylan, the one who accepted Jordan without question, who gave her a place to stay when her life was blown to ruins. Wylan, the only one able to talk her down when she was done with Kaz and done with this city. *I'm not defending him. I'm just not agreeing with you.*

We are not our fathers. And no matter whose son he is, Alby deserves the closure and and Kaz never had. So, she turns towards the booth where Orlov is sitting and slips into the seat across from him.

He's build like a clay statue that was left unfinished, neck and limbs too thick, eyes peering out from beneath heavy brows, the wilted-rose tattoo peeking through the stubble on his head. "I think you have the wrong table." The way he looks at her makes her skin feel too tight, her body preparing to cut the strings, to be a puppet again. Even after all these years.

Inej touches the loose end of her mother's scarf. *You are a mother now, too, Inej.* She is so much more than the names anyone gave her. She is not a spider or a lynx or even the Wraith. She is Inej Rietveld, and her heart is an arrow, and her body and soul are staying right here.

She feels the seat shift as Alby sits beside her. “No,” he says, inhaling either courage or control, “we don’t.”

“Forgive me,” says the Thorn, his accent thick and rolling, “but I am only here to discuss a contract with a friend of mine. You have the wrong man.”

“No, Orlov, we don’t,” says Alby, and there is something crackling, flickering in his voice that Inej isn’t sure if she should douse or feed. “And don’t worry. You’ll be getting *paid* for the work you’ve done.”

Inej adjusts her scarf, allowing a blade to flash between her fingers. “I’m told you’ve been reminded of the house rules,” she muses, smiling with her teeth. “Why don’t we talk outside?”

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was supposed to feature the entire down-taking of Orlov, but then inej had Things To Say.

the new fic, if I went to touch you now, is up and ready for your eyeballs! chapter two is coming...soonish. as soon as the adhd will allow it.

also, I forgot to mention this in the notes last week, but someone on tumblr asked for references for jordan and alby, so I found these, and then I also did a little sketch of jordan for those of you who'd like a visual.

Jordan/Kaz/Alby/Inej

Chapter Summary

The family (plus Alby) confront the Thorn.

Chapter Notes

I swear this Koen arc was only supposed to be three or four chapters long, but, well… here we are. there's some exciting stuff coming up, though, that I've been planning for a long time :D before we can get to all that, though, it's time for shout-outs~

maiden_of_crows, the alby-wylan parallels are /everywhere/ and I'm definitely going to make more of a point of them in future chapters.

Heiress_Kyr, it is indeed showdown tiiiiiiime!

Lunarmoo, I love getting to play with the development of Inej viewing herself as "dangerous" and what exactly that means.

jzmn8r, thank you to you and everyone else who complimented the Jordan sketch! it seemed like a visual for her was long overdue <3

Pipperdoo, be prepared to dance again, because a new chapter is here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Only shut-eye," Jordan observes as they walk up to the exterior of the Crow and Cup. "That was a lot of self-restraint." Through the windows, she can see that it looks like a slow day for the cafe; just as well, since they are *definitely* about to cause a scene.

"Not at all," says Kaz, keeping pace beside her. He quirks an eyebrow. "Contrary to popular belief, I'm no bloodthirsty beast. I have nothing in particular against Mrs. de Vries, except for her taste in men."

"It's a miracle you're still with Inej then," Jordan mock-sighs. "Her taste is *terrible.* "

"Watch what you say." Kaz pauses to look over at her. "I could be about to take down one of Rollins' enemies for him. For you."

"It's not for me, it's for Alby."

“Worse yet.”

Jordan rolls her eyes and twirls around the knife she’s been toying with before slipping it back into its sheathe on her vest. “Besides, you don’t really believe this is one of his enemies.”

Kaz says nothing. He raises both eyebrows this time, however, which is as good as a yes, then continues on towards the coffeehouse.

Jordan wonders why they’re not approaching from the back; to start the meeting with all four of them walking through the front door would be to show their hand, and there’s no need for that to happen so soon. Besides, their mark knows her and could recognize Kaz. Alby was in the background the last time they met, and Inej will be an unfamiliar face to him, so letting the two of them be the face of the operation would let them hold the surprise until exactly when they choose to set it loose.

She gets her answer almost as soon as they reach the door. It slams open, and the Ravkan man she recognizes from before comes charging out, only to by stopped by the tip of Kaz’s cane flicking up and driving into his gut. He reaches back towards his belt, where a flash of an oily gleam reveals the pistol he must be going for, but then his wrist is caught up in a strong hand—it’s Inej, emerging from the door behind him, twisting his arm back.

He tries to reach across with his other hand, but Kaz’s cane snaps up once again and connects with his wrist in the *crunch* of a rough break. “I would really think you’d know not to draw on me, Orlov,” he says, his inflection conversational, eyes and tone as dead as the eye of a hurricane. “But no one said you needed brains to be a hired gun.”

“A good thing, too,” says Inej, her voice threading like a scarf around the man’s neck. Or a noose. “They’re as likely to be blown out or dashed on these streets as anything.”

Jordan is aware that most people her age would find this somewhere on a scale from strange to appalling. Is it a sign of something wrong with her, that she is excited by it? Danger has been her friend, all the years of her childhood. It ran beside her, challenged her to climb higher, try harder, test the strength of every border she met. It had been a loyal companion, in a strange way. A welcome guest in their family. So this isn’t new to her. This is a reunion with an old friend.

But she knows it isn’t that way for everyone. Speaking of which…

She meets Inej’s eyes. *Where’s Alby?*

At first, she thinks she hasn’t been understood; Inej turns her attention back to their captive, tucking a knife beneath his hard, squared-off jaw. “Why don’t we take this out back?” she says, and her eyes flicker to connect with Jordan’s. *He’ll meet us there.*

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Kaz opts for them to take the assassin back through the Crow and Cup and out the storeroom door. Though it runs the risk of scaring off any patrons with more delicate sensibilities, he’d

rather make a show of what happens to those who break the house rules. He is nothing if not opportunistic, and he's not about to waste the chance to make an example.

He inhales, takes stock of himself. Checks his mind. He can see a sliver of what lies past the black door that is more and more often locked these days; this sorry skiv tried to draw on him. On *Jordan.* He tests the tumblers of that mental lock, considers what lies behind it. If he has to open it, has to let the monster out, he won't be sorry. But then again, he almost never is.

Orlov knows more than he's letting on, Kaz is willing to place a bet on it; he just isn't sure how much. And he's not going to circumvent a backup plan before he knows it exists. It's a fifty-fifty game between prevention and wasting resources.

They drag Orlov out into the alley that wraps around behind the Crow and Cup, populated only by bins for refuse that most clearly don't use. Kaz drives the tip of his cane into Orlov's barrel chest, shoving the assassin off-balance; Inej takes the pistol and lets him fall to his back, lets him get the breath knocked from him.

Behind Kaz, the storeroom door shuts, and Alby Rollins steps out to stand beside him on the platform that acts as a single step. They're nearly the same height. Somehow Kaz finds this immensely irritating.

"The hell did I do?" Orlov spits, his injured wrist clutched close to his chest. "I was minding my business. I didn't break your damn rules, Brekker."

"You know exactly what you did," Rollins' kid spits from beside him.

Kaz lets that black door open wider. It invites him in. It tempts him to let Dirtyhands out. Most of what he has against the Thorn isn't personal, but this would be a fine chance to show Alby Rollins what he's dealing with. "That's an excellent question, Orlov, and I'd like you to answer it for *me* ," he says with a cruel and twisted grin. "What *did* you do?"

"This is about the kid, isn't it?" Orlov starts to sit up, but Inej kicks him back down. He props himself on his elbows and juts his chin at Jordan. "Her."

"I'm certainly not happy that you tried to kill one of my Dregs," says Kaz, tilting his head to one side. It's as if the temperature has dropped; the air feels sharper in his lungs. His head feels clearer. It's been too long since he's had a chance like this. "But not quite."

" *One of your Dregs* ," Orlov mocks. He leers up at Kaz. "Sure. You keep saying that, Brekker."

"Stop *playing* as if you didn't—" Alby lunges forward, but Kaz flicks his cane up to stop him. This kid needs to learn patience. He looks to the side and is met with a furious green glare.

Green like his father's emerald-crusted palace. Appropriate. Kaz wouldn't put it past Rollins to pick his mistresses based on the details. "You never know," he says, his voice frosted over.

“They can forget. They never know how much it matters until you *remind* them.” If only Rollins’ kid had any idea.

“Then *let me*— ” Alby pushes the barrier of Kaz’s cane away. Kaz lets him.

Frankly, he hadn’t even expected this much fight from the kid. But Alby goes and stands in front of the Thorn, hands in shaking fists, otherwise unarmed. Well. At least he’s got guts.

Inej doesn’t look to Kaz consult him—but why should she? She hands Alby the pistol.

“What are you doing?” Jordan asks. There’s a note of fear in her voice. *Why?* She knows the things her parents have done. They’ve prepared her for the fact that she might have to do those things too, someday.

“Nothing that matters,” Orlov replies, grinning at Alby with a mouthful of malice. “You won’t do it.” His eyes cut upwards in Kaz’s direction. “And you won’t let him.”

“You think I won’t?” Frankly, from the sound of Alby’s voice, Kaz would’ve drawn the same conclusion as Orlov. The kid may be angry, but anger isn’t enough to do what he’s threatening. Kaz, however, is ready to put a bullet in Orlov himself if he doesn’t quit talking about Jordan.

The Thorn sits up further, suddenly careless of the press of Inej’s knife when she drops into a swift crouch and puts it to his throat. Eyes bright, he says, “No, you won’t, *Alby Rollins.”*

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The pistol shakes in Alby’s hands. He hasn’t held a gun since he was small and his da was showing him how it worked. He isn’t even sure he remembers that part.

“So—so it was me,” he says. He’s trying to sound braver than he feels, he really is, but something about the way that the assassin won’t stop *smiling* is getting under his skin. “It was me you were meant to kill.” He looks sideways at Jordan, but she’s just watching him, dark eyes wide as if to take in as much as possible.

“Don’t know,” says the Thorn, his head swaying like a snake’s as it rises to strike. “Was it? Shoot me. You won’t find out.”

Inej tightens her grip on the back of his neck from where she’s crouched at his side, forcing his neck against the blade. “We have other ways to make you talk, Orlov. You’ll sing opera if we ask.”

Alby glances sideways to the end of the alley, several buildings down, where it opens onto a main walkway beside the canal. People walk past and pay no attention. He wonders if they’d hear the gunshot, and if they did, if they would even bother to look. He could be the one to make sure that Urstal Orlov is forgotten. This bullet could be oblivion.

Does he even want that kind of power?

“My voice is no good,” says Orlov, relaxed as a doll despite the blade drawing a thin red line at his throat. “You don’t want me to sing.”

“And you don’t want to die,” Jordan points out, hand on one of her knives.

“Do I not?” The assassin’s eyes move to somewhere over Alby’s head, and he realizes that Jordan’s da is still behind him. “I’m not honest, Brekker, but let me try it for once. I know she’s your kid. You kill me, and the rest of the city finds out too.”

Alby wants to look behind him, to see Brekker’s face, but he can’t risk taking his eyes off of the assassin. The gun is growing heavy. His hands want to drop. “Say that’s worth it. Say what you know about me matters more. Then what?”

“I don’t think it does,” Orlov says, tilting his head in almost a mockery of the expression Alby has seen on Dirtyhands, even on Jordan. “I think he gets to decide. And his secrets aren’t worth *you.* ”

“How do you know who he is?” Jordan demands. “Tell us while you still can. I’ll take out your teeth and line a piano with them and *then* we’ll see how you sing.”

Alby is tempted to point out that no human has enough teeth for that purpose, but it seems counterproductive, and besides, he *wants* Orlov afraid. He wants to see a shred of the terror that he’s felt ever since he walked into his room and saw Koen laid out on the carpet. He wants to see the assassin panic like he has, see him struggle for air, see his eyes go white and desperate.

Good thing he talked to Brekker before all this. Good thing he’s got the trump card that he needs.

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Inej clocks the change in Alby’s face and immediately gets wary. His eyes have narrowed, sights on a rifle finding their target. It’s not a look she’s seen on him before. It’s not a look that she likes.

And then he speaks. “If you want to bargain, Orlov, we can bargain. Neither of us is all the way Kerch, but let’s do what the locals do. So I’ve got an offer for you now, *ja?* ” His arms relax, and just like that, the pistol rests at his side. “You tell me how you know my name, and I *don’t* tell Willem de Vries where you are.”

“Why should I care what some mercher knows? *Stadwatch* can’t pin anything on me.” Orlov is a good actor, Inej will give him that. But she’s spent years learning to read *Kaz,* of all people; no one can obscure their thoughts from her anymore. And where the Thorn was cocky and lax a moment ago, now he’s on edge. The power has shifted. She can feel Kaz’s silence from the doorway, leaning forward, closing in like walls.

“I’ve heard it’s a good interrogation technique,” Alby says, standing up a bit straighter, “to answer a question with a question. So try this. How did you shoot Koen Anholts in a locked room and not even stir the dust on the window? The paper on the desk?” Before Orlov can

start again, he makes a swiping motion with the gun and says, “Don’t worry. You don’t have to answer. I already know. I’m just showing you that I do. See how this works?”

Inej glances back towards Kaz, still standing in the doorway, hands folded over his cane, eyes black in the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. She knows this must have been his doing. But how much of it? How wise is it, to train Rollins’ son out of being the frightened boy he was? She doesn’t like the way that power suits him. It makes her uneasy.

“What do you want?” Orlov spits, straining up against the edge of her blade. Inej shoves his shoulder down, into a puddle where a dip in the street has collected runoff from the gutters above.

“My friend back,” says Alby, and a shadow of the way he’d sounded before, open like a gaping wound, returns to his voice. His expression twists before he smoothes it back out. “But you can’t give me that. So instead you’re going to tell me how you know who I am.”

Orlov seems to wrestle with himself, but Inej keeps him from physically struggling. At last, he says, “I wasn’t hired to kill you. To watch you.”

“That’s what you were doing in the Crow and Cup when we were there,” Jordan interjects, stepping towards them.

“How long?” says Alby, fingers flexing around the pistol at his side. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “How long were you watching me? Who hired you?”

“One question at a time,” Orlov snaps.

The uncertainty vanishes from Alby, and he all but snarls, “I’ll ask as many questions as I damn well please. I don’t owe you anything. And you’ll *never* pay me back for what you took.”

“Plenty of assassins in Ketterdam,” says the Thorn, seemingly trying to regain his previous bravado. “Why are you so sure I did it?”

“Do you want me to tell them?” Alby’s voice grows quieter, slower, and Inej can see his chest rise and fall with each unsteady breath. “Do you really want me to?” With only silence as an answer, he looks towards Jordan, then back to Inej. “A locked room. An impossible shot. Unless…” His gaze swings back around to pin the assassin where he lies against the bitter stone of the alley. “You’re a Fabrikator. And Willem de Vries kept a few indentured to him. But one of them ran off. Wanted to start a new life, maybe?” He re-adjusts his grip on the gun, and an untrained observer wouldn’t be able to tell if he’s unsure how to hold it or impatient to fire. Inej happens to know which one is the truth, but that doesn’t diminish the effect.

“You don’t know that,” Orlov growls. Inej grips a pressure point at his shoulder, just in case he tries to struggle again. “You don’t know any of that.”

“But we do.” At last, Kaz chips in, and his smile is cutting, hungry. A predator’s smile, a mouth full of teeth. “And it all makes sense. Pull off the hit on de Vries, you’re no longer on

the run. You were even so thoughtful as to offer dear Eline a discount."

Inej is tempted to roll her eyes. Typical Kaz, saving a few of the facts for his own grandstanding purposes.

"Look, you want to know who? And how long? I started getting paid maybe a year ago, all right? Supposed to watch the kid and report back." Orlov is desperate now, restless and sweating, his eyes getting shifty. Too bad Inej has him pinned down.

"I'm also curious," Kaz continues, "what de Vries will do when we return you to him. Throw you in Hellgate? Give you a debt you'll never work off? He might always decide to bury you himself."

"I've got a name!" Orlov practically shouts. He tries to force himself up to sitting and gives a yell when Inej's knife sinks deeper. "You want a name, I've got one, all right? Never met the man. But he always paid me under Hertzoon. Jakob Hertzoon."

Inej should be holding her knife hand steady. She should be watching their captive. She should be connecting the pieces as they're being laid out before her. But instead, she looks to Kaz.

I have a guess.

Didn't he say that at the Ostrich? Didn't he confide his suspicions to her? Didn't he say, hunched over some pile of papers or other the way that they used to do, that he only needed the confirmation?

All that she sees in his face is satisfaction, the curl of a burned parchment corner, still with the lingering odor of smoke. His mouth opens like a door. *If you ever cared about me at all, don't follow.* "There it is." His head snaps towards Alby like a puppet's, like some kind of machine. "Alby, did you happen to know any of your father's false names?"

Inej barely even needs to look at Kaz's eyes to tell. *He knew* . He already knew.

You're going to tell him like this? Forget the captive, forget all the rest of it. Inej is staring openly at Kaz. She has gotten used to working in tandem with him, being his sole confidant —too used to it. She should have remembered the Kaz who never gives it all away. Always another trick up his sleeve. And it's dawning on her now that he was the mastermind of this encounter, the only one with all the secrets.

He knew Orlov was a Fabrikator. He knew Orlov had discovered who Jordan was. And he knew Pekka Rollins was behind it all. All that he had to do was show his hand.

This means that Rollins knows about Jordan, too.

That he has known.

For a year.

Chapter End Notes

apologies for the cliffhanger; this whole confrontation was meant to be one chapter, MAYBE two, but everyone wanted to have some character development and I didn't want to drop 5K words out of nowhere 😅

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

happy 1989 TV day to all who celebrate! just as a heads-up, "say don't go" is the most kanej thing I've ever heard and you should go listen to it. I don't have much news besides that, so let's hop right into your shout-outs~

always_reding2027, oh, don't worry, she will. not in this chapter, but she will.

arggghhh, it's good to have you back, though I did forget the number of g's and h's in your username and had to count, lol.

Viva_La_Bohemia, there will likely be more angry Alby to come, just...of a more complicated sort.

jzmn8r, hey guess what? it's friday again! XD

Heiress_Kyr, I love nothing more than when characters are complicated and multifaceted.

thephonyqueenofengland, kaz is definitely getting a talking-to for this one.

Lunarmoo, one of these days I'll find an excuse to write more kanej combat, because they truly are THAT power couple.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The voice comes from behind him, rich with satisfaction. “Alby, did you happen to know any of your father’s false names?”

It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense. The pieces are all in front of him, lined up like little soldiers, waiting patiently to be connected, and Alby just…can’t do it. He isn’t a general like his father was. He has no reason to think they’ll obey at his call. And it isn’t an order he wants to give, because he knows what the shape the formation will make.

He can’t look at Brekker, can’t look at Orlov. His eyes are out of focus. All he can bring himself to do is stare at the blurred stone of the alley. “What do you mean?” His voice sounds

higher, thinner, than he wants it to. It doesn't sound like him anymore.

Brekker gives something like a short laugh. He's *enjoying this.* "Your father," he says, the rasp in his voice like the rolling burn of a cat's purr, "used to run cons under a handful of names. One I'm sure he used more than once was Jakob Hertzoon. Useful disguise to have when you're paying off an assassin. Or a spy."

Alby imagines the facts aligning themselves with the patterns in the cobblestones and wishes one of them would desert. On this stone: Jakob Hertzoon is his father. On that stone: Orlov was paid to watch him. And kill Koen. On the one beside it: Orlov was paid by someone using the name Hertzoon. Alby isn't studying geography, but Jordan would say he can draw a pretty damn good map, and he knows where these arrows are pointing. X marks the spot. But he refuses to dig.

He points the pistol back at Orlov. "You're sure that was the name?"

The Thorn seems to have regained some of his earlier bravado at the sight of Alby faltering. "*I* am. Can't help it if you're not." Mentally, Alby curses Dirtyhands for throwing the whole plan off-track, but then again, maybe this *was* the plan. Maybe it's his own fault for trusting Brekker, trusting Jordan's parents, trusting Jordan herself. Maybe his da was right, and this is what he had to do to get Alby to listen.

"Jakob Hertzoon wasn't just paying off a spy to make sure his son was well-adjusted and still breathing," Dirtyhands continues from behind him, and there's a bite to his voice now, acid or gunsmoke. "He decided Ketterdam wasn't showing off her dangers well enough. Maybe some false fear would do the trick. Maybe he'd just fool his kid with a frame-up, get him to run safely home. Does that sound right to you, Alby?"

How is he supposed to know who to trust, what to believe? All of this hinges on the fact that Dirtyhands is telling him the truth, and how likely is *that?* He could just be sowing false mistrust, easily as anything. So why does something in Alby's gut tell him that this isn't a lie? Why does it feel so terribly real?

"I have no reason to believe you," he says.

"None whatsoever." The response is an echo of what he heard in the Crow Club, a warning he now sees he should've heeded the first time. Maybe he really isn't made for this city. Maybe he should've just gone home before he got tricked and trapped by a Barrel boss too dangerous for him to have ever been messing with.

"Well, what now, Dirtyhands?" says Orlov, grinning with a mouthful of teeth. "Whether you kill me or not, the city finds out about your little girl. Maybe you can stop them in time."

"I don't think it's up to me." That voice comes from over his shoulder like a demon whispering in his ear. "What'll you do, Alby Rollins? Go back to your da, into his open arms? Take the bait and run home?"

Alby's head is spinning. The invitation is clear enough, but he isn't about to take it. Not from his da and not from Kaz Brekker. The one thing he swore he wasn't going to do was run

away.

He has a loaded gun. He could take his chances. He saw Brekker break Orlov's wrist when he tried it, but maybe Alby is foolish enough to believe he could be faster. Or he could do what he came here to do. Get his revenge. He isn't sure how Koen would take it, wherever he is, but… *What you do now isn't for him. It is for you.*

But what does *he* want?

Alby looks up, locks eyes with Jordan. He wants a lot of impossible things. He wants everything to go back to the way it was. He wants Jordan to have a normal family that doesn't hate, suspect, or want to use him as a pawn. He wants a father who isn't paranoid enough to scare him out of this city by any means possible. He wants a life without so many secrets. But the one thing he wants that he has any shot at getting is…her. And for her, the rest is all worth it. He's going all in on Jordan, placing his bets. If Ketterdam is a business, well, Alby is deciding right here that however else this day ends, Jordan is worth it.

If you take who you were before a person, and subtract that from who you are after, the worth is in the difference.

It's an investment he never intended to make, but he's rich in ways his father and Kaz Brekker will never understand. He doesn't want to be who he was before Jordan. His world is so much bigger now. His heart, too, he thinks sometimes.

And what about Koen? What does that solution come out to? Alby knows Koen's side of the equation: he was nervous, bookish, loyal regardless of how much it frightened him. And if *Koen* , of all people, could stand his ground for his friend if for nothing else, then Alby isn't about to do any less.

Alby vowed to himself that when they found the Thorn, he wasn't going to run. He wasn't going to be frightened like his father. That was all that his promise meant, really, wasn't it? That he wasn't going to be like his da? Well, then, what would his da do?

He'd take the shot. And he wouldn't think twice about it. It would eliminate a threat and pass his personal brand of judgment.

Alby flexes his hand around the gun. He wants a lot of impossible things. But he doesn't want this.

He drops the gun. It clatters against the cobbles at the volume of a shot going off, but there's no spark, no smoke, no bullet.

The knight doesn't always have to slay the dragon. Sometimes, the weapon that he wields is the power of mercy. Sometimes, to have strength and choose to lay it down is enough. Alby knows that Dirtyhands might still deliver the killing blow, for the sake of keeping his secrets. But at least if he was just another moving part in this plan, Alby has broken free from the works of the machine. He's made his own choice. *It's not for him. It's for me.*

“Smart choice, boy,” says Orlov. “Funny thing, Dirtyhands, I thought you were calling the shots. But maybe I was wrong.”

Alby looks back over his shoulder at Brekker. Maybe he shouldn’t care what Dirtyhands thinks. Maybe some defiant part of him wants the satisfaction of seeing that he is upsetting the plan. But when he meets Brekker’s dark and flinty stare, he’s startled to find a glint of surprise hiding in that shadow.

“What’ll you do now?” says Orlov, reclining back, looking almost comfortable if not for the bent wrist he’s still holding against his chest. “Follow his example? Let me go? You can’t win, Dirtyhands.”

Before Brekker can answer, Inej lifts her knife and steps away from Orlov’s side. “Go,” she says, chin held high, that same understated strength in her tone as before.

Orlov rubs a hand over the thin cut that collars his throat, beady eyes darting around the group assembled in the alley. “All your soldiers are deserting, aren’t they, Dirtyhands?”

Alby thinks of the facts lined up in their little rows, marching themselves to a conclusion whether he wanted them to or not. He could’ve told Kaz Brekker that no general, of the Barrel or a battlefield, can run his family like an army. Here’s his father with a spy out of the game and a son consorting with the enemy, and there’s Dirtyhands with his broken machine of a scheme. Alby grew up on Kaelish and studied Kerch, so he knows what *Brekker* means. Breaker. Destroyer.

Brekker’s face remains impassive, his posture all angles, every line of his frame hammered straight. “Remember what we know.”

Orlov gives a mocking salute and gets warily to his feet. None of them watch him leave.

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Alby can feel their eyes on him. Suddenly he wishes that he had Jordan’s ability to go unseen. He walks over and kneels to pick up the fallen pistol, then turns it over in his hands, as if making himself smaller will allow him to pass under their collective gaze.

Inej crosses to stand beside him. “Remember what I told you,” she says contemplatively.

Alby straightens up and hands off the gun to her. At the mid-pass moment where the pistol first hits her palm, he hesitates, then says, “I did.” He lets go. “It wasn’t for him. It was for me. It was what I wanted.”

Inej nods once, arms coming to rest at her sides. “As long as you’re certain.”

“Don’t start thinking that the plan ends here,” Dirtyhands interjects, rapping his cane against the step down from the storeroom door. He joins them all at street level, surveying the scene, and Alby imagines that he can hear the scraping of gears that need oil, the ticking of a mechanism just slightly off-beat. “There are still loose ends to be tied up. And since you

decided to sprout some morals"—he looks in Alby's direction—"know the Thorn may well still be after you, just in case you change your mind."

Alby shrugs. "I know." The nothingness he's been feeling since he found Koen's body has been uncomfortable, ill-fitting, an absence that ached and prodded. This is different. It's as if finding out that violence was easy, feeling the weight of power in his hands, was enough—like he didn't have to use it, like he just needed the knowledge and then he could set it down.

He looks towards Jordan, but she's watching her da, the two of them locked in some kind of staring contest—no, *glaring* contest. Brekker breaks from it first, with a muted scoff, and turns without ceremony to head towards the mouth of the alley.

"Jordan," says Inej. She pulls her patterned scarf forward over her hairline. "You can see yourself home?"

"Of course, Mama," says Jordan, though she's still watching her father retreat with narrowed eyes. Alby has never heard her use that name before; she always seems to use first names for both of her parents, as strange as he'd found that at first. But with Jordan, the chances of her trying to make a point and just being distracted are split down the middle.

If Inej notices the change in address, she's very good at hiding it. "I'll see you at home, *meja* ," she says before starting off down the street. The way she carries herself reveals no more than her expression does. Alby has to wonder how two people who are so unreadable raised a child as expressive as Jordan.

It isn't exactly quiet once the strike of cane on cobbles fades, but it's as quiet as Ketterdam can stand to be. Aimless, Alby shoves his hands into his pockets. Looking nowhere in particular—just not at Jordan—he says, "Your da planned all that."

Alby doesn't want to be the wedge between Jordan and her father. He doesn't want her to have to face what he's facing once the righteous anger wears off. He knows he'll never be worth what her parents are to her, and he shouldn't be. And he knows that this probably isn't something Jordan needs to be told, based on the look on her face. But some part of him wants the confirmation, even if all it'll tell him is that he fell for a scheme.

Jordan lets out a quiet exhale, standing some feet away from him. At last, she says, "I know." It sounds the same way it did when he said it. Resigned. Heavy. Hard to put down, impossible to pick back up again.

Alby picks at a loose bit of skin by his thumbnail, his eyes fixed on it and his mind elsewhere. He thinks of tearing it off in one go. "So did mine, apparently."

"He tried," says Jordan. He knows she's trying to sound tough, determined, but if anything there's a fragile sort of hopefulness in her voice. He could crush it in his hand if it doesn't crush him first.

He looks down the alley to the narrow rectangle of the street beyond, the gray sky, like a cutout or a doorway. "They're not going to realize how alike they are. They're too busy hating each other. But they both want to get me away from you."

Maybe it's not fair to Jordan for him to say it. They both wish that things were simpler, he knows that. But if he chooses to learn anything from Kaz Brekker, it'll be that things only happened one way, and if they want to move forward, they'll have to plan around it. Sure, he wants a lot of impossible things, but Jordan doesn't have to be one of them. If it means making her a possibility, he can let the rest of it go.

"They're going to have to try harder than that," she says, and he can hear the smile in her voice.

Alby looks back over his shoulder, though not all the way at her. "Oh, I bet they will. I won't make you take sides. But I'm not going home." He isn't going to run. For Koen, for Jordan, for himself, he's got a promise to keep. And he couldn't face his father right now anyway without breaking something.

"Good," she says, and all of a sudden she sounds much closer. Alby feels a tap on his shoulder and turns the rest of the way around, and there's Jordan. She smiles at him, a small and hopeful edge of something greater, and Alby feels the world begin to right itself. "Is it okay if I don't talk to your back anymore? I sort of like your face."

Ghezen knows how red his ears must be. Alby hopes she likes that, too. He hopes she likes the rest of him enough to last through whatever comes next. He hopes it's not selfish, or cowardly, if he wants to just forget, for today.

Jordan seizes his face like she did when he first came to her in a panic, putting blinders on, blocking out the rest of the world. "Alby," she says, and there's so much breath in her voice all of a sudden; if anyone has a right or reason to look so delighted under these circumstances, it would be her. "Just don't think about them for a second. *You did it.* "

Alby tries to look away, but with the eclipse that Jordan has created, the world is nothing but her face, her eyes. "But I didn't. I didn't do it." It may not have been clever or safe or any kind of victory, but he's clinging to the fact that it was *right.* That's the only landmark that he's got left.

"That's just it," Jordan insists, her thumb moving over his cheekbone. Her grasp tightens, pads of her fingers pressing harder. "Kaz thought you would. Your da probably would've thought the same thing. You showed them they were were wrong."

Did he? Even if he did the right thing, Alby himself was wrong about *so much.* "But Orlov wasn't even all the way to blame. My…my da was. *He* really killed Koen. He sent the letter. He signed the check." His breath is coming faster now, fanning a newly lit furnace. He grasps one of Jordan's hands where it rests against his cheek, squeezing tight, holding her gaze as if there's anywhere else for it to go. "Just a moving piece in the plan. Jordan, if *anyone's* life ever starts mattering that little to me, throw me in the canal and hold my head under. Got it?" It might sound ridiculous, but Alby is as serious as he's ever been.

He knows what he has the potential to become. He doesn't just have his father's blood. He's got sixteen-odd years of being raised by the man—albeit a shattered shell of him—stored up inside, and Ghezen knows what that could make him into. This city doesn't need any more monsters.

There are a lot of things Jordan could say, but Alby sees understanding set into the lines of her expression. He knew she wouldn't be frightened or offended by that responsibility, that challenge. Maybe neither of them are all the way good or all the way kind, but they can make each other better than what came before. "You'll never be like that," she says, and she sounds so certain that it almost convinces him. One of her thumbs sweeps beneath his eye, and Alby wonders if she was brushing aside a tear he hadn't noticed. "You won't."

Alby laughs in spite of himself, brittle-edged though it might be. "Why not?"

"'Cause I said so."

Just like he did at the Crow Club, Alby rests his forehead against hers, letting his eyes fall shut. He doesn't feel, in this moment, like they're a prince and a princess of anything. They're just a couple of kids clinging to each other in an alley, pretending that they aren't legacies or stand-ins for lost lives. That they're free from the risks of being royal.

He doesn't ask Jordan if her da was lying. He doesn't need her to confirm the lead weight that has lodged itself in his gut. "I don't know what to believe in anymore." He knows the righteous thing would be to stay in Ketterdam and never look back. But there's a part of him, the part that grew up on a world small enough to see all at once, that still craves safety. And there's only one place outside of home that he's found that. He moves his head away, holds Jordan by the waist. "Except you. I always believed in you, Jordan. I've always sort of thought you could do anything, if you really wanted to."

She worries her lower lip briefly. Alby allows himself to be taken in by the motion, to let it consume him for a moment so he doesn't think about anything else. She smoothes down Alby's collar, then looks up at him and says, "In that case…can I do this?"

She grasps his collar, draws him nearer. Pauses. Alby nods.

It's the kind of kiss he can sink into and linger in. The kind that's good for forgetting.

Chapter End Notes

and then jalby have their first kiss at the same place as their first date. hehe.

I'm *very* excited about some of the stuff that's coming up in the next arc; it is right up my character-study-analysis-angst alley, so put on your english class thinking caps and break out your floaty comment boxes, everybody.

as always, I am on instagram @fairytales_of_forever and tumblr @fairytalesofforever, and I would be much obliged if you would go to those places and yell your thoughts to me.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej confronts Kaz. Kaz confronts himself.

Chapter Notes

I'm very excited about this chapter, so I won't keep you from it for too long. still, we begin as we must always do—with some shout-outs~

maiden_of_crows, all the characters have been doing a lot of thinking about legacy—whether it's something you want to create, whether you have a choice in carrying it on.

jzmn8r, I love jalby. they're such babies <3

Heiress_Kyr, I'm proud of alby too :D

cameliawrites, I've grown to love alby a lot as a character because of how surprising his strength is. you see this slightly dorky little guy and don't expect him to commit to things as fiercely as he does.

Lunarmoo, there are definitely some matthias-alby parallels here too (deciding for the sake of a scary, beautiful, non-traditional girl to renounce the ideals he was raised with...)

Rouges_of_Ketterdam, thinking cap secured? good, then here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Inej returns to Thirteen Zelverstraat, a storm is brewing.

Clouds clot and scab over a wounded sunset as she pushes open the blue front door in silence. The geraniums in the window boxes don’t look as if they’ll survive the winter—or even this next rain.

She isn’t sure which way Kaz will have taken. They parted after crossing the canal without discussing where they were going—or anything else, for that matter. They’ve never had to talk about things like that. But this time, she feels as if they should have.

When she enters their room, the sash is still drawn back from the single window, a remnant of the morning. Kaz had swept it aside to let the sun in while she lay there on the bed, stealing a

few more moments of peace like the thief he taught her to be. But Kaz was too good of a teacher; the morning had broken in with all the agility of a master spider and sprawled itself over the bed, warming her face, her skin.

Kaz paused then and looked back at her, a mask of light on one side of his face, mouth almost open with something he never said. She wishes she had the memory of what those words might've been to hold on to now.

Now, the room is gray and dim, blurry in the corners, as if her vision has grown dusty. She turns on the flame in one of the lanterns, and it flings the shadows back into those murky corners, reddening the rest of the room with sufficient light.

Now to wait. Contrary to popular belief, patience has never been one of the virtues Inej possesses, but she is proof that it can be learned as a skill.

She crosses and sits on the end of the bed. Beds used to be the thing at the other end of her manacles, the places she left her body behind. But this one is the place her body becomes most hers, in the decision to share it. It is the defiant altar of her freedom and she sits on it not like the offering, but like the one who receives it. The way Kaz loves her might be blasphemous. Her younger self certainly would have thought so. But she will prefer a profane, crooked love as long as it is true.

The temptation is there, today, to make this bed a judgment throne. But that's too righteous for the love she has for him.

She used to hate it when the children would kiss her hands, touch her clothes, call her *Sankta,* ask for a lock of her hair. But if a Saint with a cutlass was a more frightening monster than a mere girl, she could take a new name. Kaz has finally succeeded in convincing her that just as with monsters, if they're already calling you a Saint, you needn't do every saintly thing.

The door swings open slowly on well-oiled hinges, pushing an arc of shadow across the floor. And there's Kaz, leaning heavily on his cane, backlit by the lamps in the hall. He looks over at Inej, taking his time about it— *so I know he's noticed me,* she thinks—then begins the motions of his usual routine. Hat on the topmost hook by the door. Coat on the hook beneath it.

The gloves should be next—into his pocket, or his desk drawer—but he leaves them on.

Inej watches. She won't be the first one to speak. It's an interrogation tactic she learned in her Dregs days that serves her as well at home as it does on the seas; Kaz has a certain weakness for her silences. She lets them prod him in a way that her words could not do as well.

He pauses, standing opposite the bed and dresser, and she knows she's got him. "What business, Inej?"

Inej clocks his impatience and elects to ignore it. "When were you going to tell me that Pekka Rollins knew about Jordan?"

Kaz nods once, with that infuriating air of confidence that makes people lose their logic in the urge to simply strangle him. As if he always knew you were going to do what you'd just done, as if no matter what you tried, it would play into his hand. The trouble is, it doesn't work on Inej, because she happens to know just how often he's bluffing. "You know now, don't you?"

"I wanted to know as soon as you did." Inej leans forward, tracking him as he crosses to the desk, trying to make him look at her. "If this is a threat, it's a threat to us all, Kaz. Jordan is *our* daughter."

Kaz pulls out the desk chair but doesn't sit in it. He's almost in front of the window now, where the clouds have grown thick and swirled together. "Let me ask you something, Inej. Answer a question with a question, like Alby Rollins would say to do." His index finger taps against the top of the chair, and then he does look up at her. "Why not tell me you were going to talk to the kid? Dispense some wisdom, some Suli proverbs? Why not, Inej?"

She sits up straighter, squares her shoulders. If it's a fight Kaz wants, he's picked the one person who can match him. "Because if I told you, I'd have to fight you for it."

Now Kaz does sit. "Exactly. We're only thinking alike, Inej." He turns his back to her and begins collecting some paper on the desk into a stack, as if that will just be that.

"Don't feed me that, Kaz. You know I won't like the taste." She is more than one of the crows that visit his window, bringing some shiny trinket for a bit of seed.

A muscle tics in his jaw. His gloved hand flexes against the desk, then lays flat. "Then how should I concoct an answer you'll swallow, Inej?" There's frustration in the bitter strain of his tone, but not true anger, not yet. And one of the base things Inej has essentially always trusted is that she is the exception—she can poke his soft and bruised places and make it out intact. Even when she was most furious with Kaz, she never really relinquished that belief.

Still, in a case like this, there are different dangers. She remembers realizing, as she lay collapsed on the floor in her locked room at Wylan's, that she has the power to hurt Kaz without ever drawing a blade. It's not one that she wants to use again.

"Tell the truth," she says. "If it's bitter, I will suffer it like medicine." *Better terrible truths than kind lies.*

He gives the barest shake of his head. "You know I'm a liar. Not to mention a poor healer."

She ignores the joke. It's part decoy and part shield, and her aim is too good for either one. "Bad at healing yourself, too, Kaz." She tilts her head to one side, watches him with a new kind of compassion. He isn't the only one who has learned things over the years. Inej has a restless spirit to wrangle as Kaz has his walls to tear down, and between the two of them they meet at the gates. Or, at least, they try. "If you won't tell me, I'll tell you instead. One of us has to tell the truth today." She twists her mother's scarf around her hands and keeps her eyes on him. "It isn't because I would have stopped you. It's because it was Alby Rollins."

The thunder grows in strength. It speaks where Kaz does not.

“You thought you’d frighten him,” she says, her voice growing in strength as she goes on. Kaz can’t help but hear. It’s just the two of them alone in this grey room. “Introduce him to Dirtyhands and send him running home. But in order to do that, you had to tempt him enough to get him eating out of your hand, just so that you could catch him by the neck.” One of her hands curls into a fist around the quilt. “Am I right?”

For a moment, even the storm quiets. The only sound is the ticking of the clock in the corner.

Then Kaz turns all the way around in his chair, gripping the back of it hard enough to crease the leather of his gloves. “You’re willing to bet on him not being his father’s son?” he demands. “That’s enough for you to put Jordan on the table?”

The way he bites into Jordan’s name sounds like the echoes of an office and an argument, now almost three years past. *Will you listen to me this time, Jordie?*

Inej doesn’t think he will. Kaz has always been the listener; he has whispered to her of the voice that reaches him on the harbor wind, that murmurs from beneath bridges and in the rushing of a current. The voice that speaks in storms like this.

“You may have been helpless against Pekka Rollins once,” says Inej, “but we are the monsters now. We made ourselves monsters to protect her. What is it worth if we don’t use it?”

“Maybe it’s the monstrous thing,” Kaz replies, his voice harsh with damage, “to hurt her feelings and keep her *alive.* ” He’s being pulled out by the tide, she can feel it. She knows now why plague sirens are called *sirens* , the voices that lure from the deep.

“You were wrong about Alby Rollins once. You didn’t think he’d take the shot.”

“And we need a backup plan now that he didn’t.” Kaz rakes a hand through his hair. “We still have the indenture to hold over Orlov’s head, but it’ll take better spies than the little spiders to hunt him down—”

Before he even turns to her, Inej says, “No.”

Kaz drops his hand irritably and looks up at her, brows raised, all geometric angles and pressed seams, hair combed back from his pale brow in razor-straight lines. She wants to dishevel him, to rumple up his dignity and bring back the man she married, but she has to remind herself that this is the same man. Her vow took *all* of Kaz to be hers.

“I’m not letting Rollins back into our lives,” she says, rising from the bed. She stands there in the middle of the floor, facing off with Kaz, and frustration surges in her; she’s throwing herself at his walls again, over and over until she breaks. “I told you I don’t miss the man that he makes you. You cannot keep letting him decide who you are.”

“I know what I am. That’s why I’m keeping Alby Rollins at arm’s length. You heard him, at the Crow Club.”

He was like my brother. And now he’s dead, and I want someone to pay for it.

It was the reason they'd initially agreed to help Alby. But now, something about it gives her pause—it's Felix Pieterse all over again. Kaz treats mirrors like targets; he knows how dangerous he is. The thing he will do anything, hurt anyone, to protect Jordan from is not Pekka Rollins. It's himself.

"Alby Rollins isn't you," she says, approaching the desk. Her shadow stretches long like a cloak behind her. "Felix Pieterse wasn't you."

She stops, standing in front of him where he sits, poised as if about to lay down a blessing—or judgment. "I don't know that you even are, Kaz. I'm not certain that you know who you are."

Dirtyhands, Brekker, Rietveld. So separate for so long. But Alby Rollins calls him by the first two names when he's acting as the third. With Orlov and Rollins knowing about Jordan, his family name is bleeding into the criminal world. Doesn't Kaz see what's bound to happen? Can't that monstrous brain of his understand that if he doesn't let the secrets go, someone will tear them from his grasp?

There's a pattering on the roof, the march of a miniature army. The rain has begun.

Inej reaches out to take his hand, but even in this moment, as frustrated as she is, she hesitates before touching him. It's only at his slight nod that she closes her hand around his, the slight warmth of the leather dredging up memories of the days when this was all they could hope for. "Kaz," she says, grasping it tight, "No one else can tell you who you are. Not me, not Jordan, not Alby Rollins…and not your brother."

He looks up at her sharply, eyes too bright, looking almost feverish. "Say his name," he insists, his voice rough as the thunder that rolls outside. He grasps her hand tighter. "Call him Jordie. Or they'll all forget."

Inej pulls his hand towards her, tries to drag him back from the current, but if her words are the tide that's taking him, she can't stop it, can't let him go. This has to be said. "They don't mean the same thing anymore," she tells him, searching for the logic, the mechanical practicality, that is Kaz's signature as much as it is his defense. If she lays out the pieces of the puzzle, the man she married should be able to put them together. But who knows if that's the same man sitting in front of her now, anchored only by her touch?

" *Jordie* is a ghost who's been standing between us for sixteen years. He's a crossroads and a gateway. He's an excuse. He is your armor and the battle flag you march beneath. He is everything *but* the boy that he was. All that's left is what you made him." She knows he'll hate the pity in her voice, but she can't help it. Doesn't he see what he's done? "You told me you never got to bury him, but, Kaz, you've done it. He's six feet beneath a legacy he never wanted. A legacy *you* made for him."

When they were talking to Jesper, Kaz spoke about legacy. About how only the ones with real money could afford it. But here's a thirteen-year-old farm boy from a town outside of Lij with a legacy that has built and burned empires while he was too far beneath the waves to know a thing about it.

“And what the hell do you know? You never knew him.” Kaz doesn’t get angry with her the way he does with anyone else. He snarls and twists like a cornered beast, like a creature caught in a trap.

She lets his hand go. “I don’t think you know him anymore either.”

He shoves his chair back and stands. “This—” He claws at his neckline, as if expecting a tie to be there, but finds only his starched collar. “It’s all that’s left,” he bites out. “The voice, the things I did in his name. Jordan. Jesper.”

Now they’re facing one another. Inej has left him to thrash in the black water on his own. She doesn’t enjoy doing this to Kaz. But she’s realizing now that what happened today was a symptom of something deeper and festering. “Wounds with stitches, remember? Yours will never heal if you keep on tearing them open.”

A wry smirk flexes the hard line of his mouth. “That sounds familiar.” There’s a note of humor in the gravel scrape of his voice, but it’s like trying to make a stone float. Maybe it needs to sink, to see how things look from the siltbed.

“So why do it, if you know how this always goes?” she presses. “Do you truly feel like you’re stronger for staying broken, by breaking yourself again and again, or do you just feel like you deserve it?”

“You can’t make me pitiable any more than you can make me good, Inej.” He’s avoiding looking at her. No—at the mirror behind her, she realizes.

“I don’t want you to be anything but safe,” Inej says, stepping closer. “Since the day I met you, you’ve stepped into the path of every bullet for the thrill of dodging it.”

“I’m surprised you’ve made it this far without burying me in proverbs,” Kaz spits, pacing, moving in and out of the meagre gray light that the storm allows.

“You want a proverb, Kaz? Try this. It’s easy to spend someone else’s money.” She knows he’ll feel her stare even if he doesn’t meet it, the same way he always sees her. *How does it feel to be the one seen for a change?* “You’re so ready to give up your life because it’s not yours. This vengeance owns you.”

He stops pacing long enough turn on her, the set of his shoulders high and tight. There's something white and wild in his eyes, something close to breaking in the way he trembles. "No," he says, his voice the snarl of a snagged gear. "It has me on loan. And sooner or later it'll have to start paying its debts."

Inej grabs the front of his vest. She won't touch him without warning, but somehow she has to hold him still. "Well, I am selfish," she says, voice low, buttons digging into her fingers. "And I am jealous. And I want you for my own. I'm not renting you out to this mission anymore. I," she says, drawing him nearer still, "am stealing you back."

Inej has had more than her fill of being for sale. But if Kaz wants to subject himself to the wills of the market, she'll play the game his way.

Once again, she sees his jaw flex. They're almost pressed together now. His eyes move to her mouth. She'd be lying if she said some part of her didn't want to let him have it, especially with how low and hoarse his voice is when he speaks. "Here I thought you were cross with me."

She slides one hand up to cup his jaw. "No, Kaz. I want you. I want you as I have always had you. A fortress is no replacement for armor."

The moment shatters with another peal of thunder. He twists away from her, almost tipping backwards, clumsy with the kind of rage that he reserves for her. "It can't be enough for you, can it, Inej? Without armor, without armor. You want me to stand in plainclothes on a battlefield and expect me not to get killed."

"Then get out of the war!" Inej's posture breaks. She hates the discordant strain of her voice; she never yells like this. "You won it years ago, Kaz. What's left? What are you fighting for anymore?"

He stares at her, eyes haunted and carved hollow, black as sockets, and Inej knows. She knows the voice he's hearing in his head. She has long since learned the art of silence, and it's high time that Jordie did too.

"You're battling yourself. That's all that's left," she says. "I still remember what you told me — *we never stop fighting.* But I think it's time to stop now."

She shuts her eyes. She can't keep looking at Kaz or she'll be willing to forget for a little longer, to fall into his arms and cherish the fact that he can embrace her at all and take it as enough. But neither of their demons were ever only skin-deep. "I'm done, Kaz. I will fight for you until it kills me or this world ends, whichever comes first. But I won't fight with you anymore. So if you go on in this war you've chosen, it will be without me."

He is silent for long enough that she can count her breaths against the percussive rain—in, out, in. Three, or one-and-a-half, depending how you look at it. Then Inej hears the shift of shoes on the floor and wonders if he's turning away from her. She won't look, so she'll never know.

"Where are you going?" she asks quietly.

She imagines Kaz looking over his shoulder, his silhouette etched in profile. A little softer, maybe.

The rain has grown gentler on the roof. Inej wonders how long it will be before the storm ends.

"To book passage back to Lij," says Kaz.

Chapter End Notes

YOU THOUGHT I'D FORGOTTEN HAHA

it was originally in the plans for the fam to go back to lij later, but then this plot arrived at an unexpected conclusion, so here we are XD one learns, after enough time as a writer, that stories are wont to change when you least expect it.

I am very excited to hear your thoughts and analysis on this one <3

P.S. the weather was a paid actor.

Jordan/Inej

Chapter Summary

Jordan gets to see the farm. Inej dares to hope.

Chapter Notes

I recommend that you listen to "marjorie" by taylor swift while reading the first half of this chapter, and "my love mine all mine" by mitski for the second half. now for shout-outs~

always_reading2027, we are in fact going back to Lij! Fair warning, it's going to be complicated for all involved.

Rogues_of_Ketterdam, I'm afraid that not even waffles will make me break my schedule. But comments do make me write faster.

greenleaf777, their dynamic provides *so much* for us writers to work with <3

EyesJustReading, I love your description of Inej as a "balance of wisdom and strength." Because yes.

maiden_of_crows, I really do love when people point out their favorite lines.

jzmn8r, don't worry, kaz's emotional torment is not quite over yet, hehe.

fitzsavorycracker, I do hope you survived long enough to make it to this chapter ;)

Heiress_Kyr, the weather deserves an oscar after that one.

Lunarmoo, there has been a lot of theming in the last twentyish chapters of kaz and his split identities, which to me is just him trying to figure out how to merge them all into one.

arillusionist, the next chapter is in fact here! welcome to the fic <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jordan steps out of the cart, snow crunches beneath her feet.

She gives a quiet gasp as she wanders a few steps forward. Everything is crystallized and brilliantly reflective, from the unbroken white path before them to the farmhouse itself, nestled into the drifts like a sleepy child, its frosted windows like half-closed eyes. She almost has to squint in the brightness of it all.

"First snow of the season," Kaz says quietly, stepping up to stand beside her.

Jordan shivers delightedly. There's a swish, and then something heavy and dark is draped over her shoulders. She looks up and realizes— "Your coat?"

"An old favorite of yours," says Inej, joining them as the cart clatters away. It's so quiet here. The world always seems quieter in the snow, Jordan thinks, but this is particularly strange after Ketterdam. She wonders how the house would look with lights in its windows.

She folds the coat sleeves over her hands so that they keep her fingers warm and looks back over at Kaz. "You really grew up here?"

"For a time." He sounds distracted, Jordan thinks. But she probably would be too, if she were standing in the middle of whatever camp she and Mama One had lived in.

Moving together, keeping an even pace, they walk past trees that reach bare limbs towards the silver sky, along what Jordan assumes must be a path beneath the snow. At the top of the shallow hill in front of them, burrowed into the snow, is an old farmhouse, brown tendrils of dry vines clinging to the walls. Its upper windows are shuttered against the cold, and the steep pitch of the roof makes it look like something out of the books she used to read in school.

"It's pretty," she says, chancing a look sideways at Kaz. But he doesn't say anything. He just keeps moving forward, a train on its tracks, like he can't stop or be stopped. Jordan isn't sure if she should try.

She's given a bit of a distraction when they step up onto the porch and Kaz opens the door; he doesn't lead her and Inej in so much as he happens to enter first, and Jordan is happy to seize the freedom and explore.

The main floor is open with lots of windows, one of which has a wooden bench and little table beneath it. Nothing is as dusty as Jordan expected it to be. She wonders if someone came in and cleaned before they got here, or if the dust was just too afraid of facing Kaz's wrath to trespass.

There's a piano by the kitchen doorway. Probably the one her da learned to play on.

It's warmer inside, but Jordan keeps Kaz's coat on; it makes her feel like she's a little kid again, protected and looked after and generally not having to make so many complicated choices.

Speaking of complicated choices…this seems like maybe the wrong place to do it, but she's been looking for a chance to talk to them both since that night on the *Wandering Heart.* It's

just that, as soon as she and Inej got back, then everything with Alby happened, though that doesn't explain why she couldn't seem to bring it up on the way here.

Maybe she can get around to it sideways. She looks over at Kaz where he stands in the empty middle of the room, and decides to risk asking a question. "Did you go to school near here? The one you told me about?"

Kaz nods once. Jordan waits, but she's never had her mama's patience.

That's why she's glad when Inej steps up to Kaz's side and, with clear forewarning, folds her fingers into his. "What's the plan?" she asks, gently enough that Jordan almost feels like she shouldn't be here. Like maybe she should leave and wait until they're being a little more like her parents and a little less like each other's husband and wife.

She startles slightly when Kaz turns to her. "What do you want to see?" Jordan was expecting a lot of different things—most likely that she wouldn't be able to read him at all—but more than anything, he sounds worn. Tired.

Jordan looks around the room again, at how simple it all is—nothing like the dazzling prism of the Silver Six, or the luxurious darkness of the Crow Club, or even the quiet elegance of Thirteen Zelverstraat. She knows what she really wants to ask, but they're the things she's certain he wouldn't answer.

How did the birds sound, when they came back in the spring?

What did your da cook on that stove? How did it smell?

What was it like, to look out the window and see apple blossoms on the trees? How did the fresh fruit taste?

Where was Jordie's room?

She wonders if Kaz and Jordie carved secret messages into the walls. She wonders if they had a dog or cat to leave fur everywhere that has long since blown or rotted away. She wonders if the smell of an apple pie could fill the whole house.

They aren't things she can see right now. They only place they exist anymore is in her da's memory, and she's not sure he could share them if he wanted to.

"Can we just…stay here, for a little while?" she asks, wrapping the end of her braid around her fingers, back and forth. "I wanted to talk to you anyway. So."

As Alby knows very well, Jordan doesn't have much of a gift for segues. But there doesn't seem to be any chance to be smooth or subtle here, not when they're all navigating an invisible obstacle course. Nimble though Jordan is, things get a lot trickier when she can't see the things that will trip or trap her.

She and Inej both look to Kaz. "We can stay," he says, though his eyes are fixed somewhere out the window. "Easier than getting a hotel." Unceremoniously, he turns towards the stairs.

This is one of those cases where Jordan's impatience threatens to get the better of her, where she wishes the three of them could just say whatever they're thinking and throw it all into a pile and if it's a mess, they can sort it together. But that's never been how her parents are. They have to consider, to check for traps, to do all the sorting on their own and hide everything beneath puzzles and safeguards. Jordan doesn't understand how they keep from going crazy.

But this is also one of the cases where she knows it's not going to change. She supposes that no family is going to be perfect, and the best thing about this one is that it's hers. They chose her. They brought her here. Maybe that's all that really needs saying, anyway.

She follows her parents up the stairs.

Upstairs, there's a plain and narrow hallway with a sloped ceiling, one door at each end. Kaz doesn't pause at the makeshift landing; instead, he seems to choose a direction and follow it, a soldier marching into battle. Once again, Jordan feels halfway like she shouldn't be here, but in a different sense—it's like he doesn't want to be seen. Like he'd rather be doing this alone.

But her da will always choose to be alone before someone else can make the choice for him. And Jordan promised to herself that she would be the one to follow, that she would stand in his way and tell him that she was staying whether he liked it or not. So she skips a few steps and goes to walk next to him; the hallway is barely wide enough for the both of them. Now, if he wants to face this like a battle, they'll be doing it side-by-side.

He stops when they get to the open doorway. Jordan wonders if he even came up here, when he and Inej were here before.

The ceiling is sloped with an uneven peak in the middle. There's a bed against one wall, just a bare frame, and two windows that face the front with an old, bolted trunk beneath them. Jordan wonders if it's empty.

She isn't sure what to say, but words have never been the easiest thing for any of them. Instead, she nudges Kaz's arm. "Is it a good hug day?"

His gaze is lost to the room in front of them, so distant that Jordan wonders if he's heard her at all. He gives the barest shake of his head but lifts one arm anyway.

Jordan frowns. "I don't want to if you're saying no."

Usually, her da holds himself so still. But she can see every rise and fall of his breath now, every slight tremor of his face standing out in sharp relief. It makes Jordan feel like nothing is solid or steady anymore, like the ground is shaking beneath her with every small motion. It's selfish, she knows, but she depends on him to be unshakeable.

Jordan wanders into the room, if nothing else so that she doesn't have to watch him anymore. It's colder here than it was downstairs, and a gentle flurry has begun to fall past the window. She walks over to the front wall and draws her fingertips over the top of the trunk, wondering if she dares open it.

Something tells her that she shouldn't.

Where was Jordie's room?

She's pretty sure she doesn't have to ask.

"You said you wanted to talk, *meja?"* Inej asks. She comes into the room, too, and goes to stand by the empty bed. It's Jordan-sized, but probably not big enough for someone full-grown.

She did, but she isn't sure it should be like this. She doesn't feel alone in this room. Maybe she has been invited into Kaz's memories, to a warmer time, when sunlight tumbled through the windows, when it smelled like apple blossoms and spring grasses and there was a boy sitting on the bed right over there, younger than she is now, checking the watch that sits in her pocket. Her name is a hand-me-down from him. The way Kaz looks at her sometimes feels secondhand too. She feels as if Kaz wrote a will for his brother, forged his signature to sign it, and left Jordan the remains of his own grief. If this becomes her place, will she just be filling the role of the stand-in that he gave her?

She never met Jordie, but sometimes she feels like she knows him all the same. Right now, with the prickling on her neck that's more than the chill in the air, if she didn't know better, she'd think he was listening.

Would he like her? Would it matter?

She doesn't want to be a replacement anymore. Maybe that's why she feels like it has to be now, that she has to tell them the direction she's chosen. Maybe it will be enough to say, I am taking the wheel of my life. I am drawing the bow. I don't want your inheritance. I am going to be my own.

"I think I figured it out," she says, glancing over towards where Kaz is still standing, framed by the empty doorway. She'd like him to hear this, too, but she isn't sure how much he's listening. "I, um. I think—" She shakes her head. "No. I know. I want to go to the University next year." She bunches the sleeves of Kaz's coat around her fists. She wishes she had something to fidget with, somewhere to put her attention that isn't on her parents' faces. She can't shake the feeling that there are three pairs of eyes on her, all expecting something that she isn't sure she can deliver.

All that Inej says is, "I'm not surprised," and she doesn't look it. "But I don't think you expected me to be."

With a furtive look in Kaz's direction, Jordan goes to sit down on the bed. He doesn't seem to register it. If there are any ghosts here, they don't react, either. "You remember when we fought the *Wandering Heart?* When Kaatje had to be belowdecks so I took over?"

Inej gives Jordan a pointed look. "Yes. Though you still should've asked me first."

"It just…" Jordan looks down at her hands and thinks of them moving like a prayer. Maybe she can teach this room something new by kneeling beside the bed every night. "It made

sense. I just knew what to do. And it mattered—it got San off of that ship in one piece." She is a compass needle finding north. She is a watch that has struck midnight. She has the *J.R.* watch in her pocket still—does it know this place? Did it sit in that trunk once? If she took it out, would its metal meet familiar air?

To Kaz, she says, "I decided what I want more. Like you said."

He takes a slow step into the room, preceded by his cane. Jordan has never seen him this hesitant. But he's perfectly lucid when he focuses on her. "And that is?"

"I…I want to learn to be a medik." Jordan curls her hands around each other and feels like she should be holding her breath. "I know Kerstan and Kaatje can teach me some stuff. But I want to learn in a real lab. I want a shiny rolled-up paper that says I know what I'm doing." *And I want to be where Alby is* , she finishes silently, but she's not sure that she should mention him right now. It doesn't seem like a name she should speak here, not when this room is empty and Alby's da is to blame.

Kaz gives a dry sound that might be a laugh. "You don't need a paper for that."

Jordan shrugs. "I didn't need a paper to say I'm your kid. But I liked it a lot better when I had one." It's not framed or anything, but she knows that her da keeps it in his office drawer; sometimes she picks the lock just to take the certificate out and look at it, to feel as sure as she did when he first gave it to her. Her name might be a hand-me-down, but now it's written and sealed and officially hers.

Could she make this place hers, too? Could she make it mean something new?

Outside, the snow is still falling. Even in here, they don't seem free from its effects; it mutes and muffles the world, and the quiet wears the same way as the cold.

"Certificate or no, you're our daughter *,* " says Inej, offering her a hand up. Jordan takes it and leans against her mama's side. Inej has never been the soft or pillowy type; she is lean and angular, lots of sharp edges. But she's solid and she's safe. That's all that Jordan has ever needed.

"Can we get hot chocolate?" Jordan asks hopefully. She's finding herself reaching for the landmarks in her earlier memories, the hot chocolate and Kaz's coat and the things that are hers and hers only. Maybe it'll remind him of a time he chose to be with them. To not be alone.

Inej gives a soft laugh. "I suppose we'll need to get some things if we're going to stay the night." They head for the door, and she gives Jordan's hand a squeeze, adding, "I'm proud of you, *meja.* "

Jordan can't quite hold back a smile. Especially when Kaz joins them and says, so quietly she almost misses it, "So am I."

She wonders if Jordie would be, too.

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It's late when Inej pads into the kitchen; Jordan is sound asleep, so far as she knows, and she has to cup a candle for both light and warmth against her hands. She wishes for a kettle, for her spiced tea from home. *Yes, home.* For so long, she resented Thirteen Zelverstraat for being an anchor, but maybe she's wise enough now to see that it keeps her from getting swept away.

She supposes that applies to Kaz too. She is a ship and he is an anchor. She cannot be kept from the wind; he cannot be dragged out of the water. But sometimes, she needs something solid to tie her down, to remind her that she is solid too. Sometimes, he needs something to pull him from the harbor.

She has one of the blankets that they brought draped over her shoulders, a woven one that her mother gave her with rough fibers in stripes of color and tassels on the edges. There is a chill that clings to the house, not just from the cold outside, but in the way of all abandoned places. Inej wonders if they will be the ones to put a fire back in its hearth.

Out the frosted front windows, one of the chairs on the small porch is rocking gently. By the starlight reflecting on the snow, she can make out the dim outline of Kaz, his coat collar turned up, staring out down the long front path.

She pushes open the door and steps silently out onto the porch. The cold outside is sharp, but it is a still and crystal cold, the kind she dares not disturb. Besides, this blanket is heavy enough to keep her warm.

Kaz glances over at her as she sits in the second rocking chair. He doesn't have his cane with him; he must have left it upstairs.

"Couldn't sleep?" Inej asks quietly, nudging the porch with her toe to gently rock her chair back and forth. It reminds her of the way the sea moves, of the desk in her captain's cabin.

"How could I?" Kaz has reclaimed his coat, but his cheeks are slightly reddened from the cold. His voice has a tired scrape to it. He tilts his head back against the chair but doesn't say anything else.

Inej can understand that. One's own ghost makes an unkind roommate. Always poking and prodding.

She isn't sure if she dares say it to Kaz, but—she can imagine them like this when they are withered and white-haired, watching the apple trees move in the wind, perhaps scolding children that run by. For once, she dares to imagine that they'll live long enough for that.

But if they don't, or if they won't, she will take the moments she's given. It's so rare to be given anything at all; why, after all, did she learn to steal? She blows out her candle and sets it down, then stands and puts a hand out to Kaz. "Walk with me?"

His hand rests in hers, ungloved. He rises. "You lead, treasure."

They walk down the single step from the porch and out into the reflective night, slowly—why should they not take their time, when they are the ones who'll take anything else they like? Inej is glad for her boots, her heavy socks; though she feared she'd feel clumsy or weighed down by them, they keep her warm, and in a strange way tethered, as they leave their shallow indents in the carpet of snow.

They wander around the side of the house, hands kept warm in the cradle of each other's grasp. Her fingertip strokes back and forth across his wedding band. They don't talk much, but they don't need to. She has said what she needed to say, and it led them here.

Could this be a safe landing? Here, among the snowdrifts, could we fall unharmed?

She once told Kaz that the secret to falling was in getting back up. But before you can get up, you are an arrow in need of a place to land.

They slow to a stop, as if their momentum has run out, in the back field, an unbroken white plain where the buttercups grew before. Kaz lets their hands hang joined between them, drawing her nearer, and Inej lets her head fall against his chest, blanketed arms encircling his middle. They sway there, slightly, and again she thinks of the sea, the way it imitates a mother's arms, answering some base memory of being swaddled and rocked to the beat of breath and pulse. An infant's first learning that life is a symbiotic thing. She breathes in time with Kaz, now. Her ear rests over his heart.

Inej imagines music—the Suli lullabies she sang to Jordan when she was small, the Kerch folk songs Kaz played on the piano in the Zelverstraat house. She imagines songs to dance around fires to and songs to raise a glass to, songs for ballrooms like the ones Wylan plays and songs for dark nights on the waves like the shanties her crew sing, clustered around a single bonelight.

There is none here. She hopes Kaz's head is as empty of voices as her own. She hopes the yawning night is as vast and gaping for him as it is for her, cut along the clearest of lines between the blank snow and black mouth of the sky. She hopes all he hears is a song.

She brings up their joined hands like they're undercover at a ball or gala, somewhere that canal rats like them have no business being, and takes a few rocking steps. Kaz follows her in a loose circle. He is watching her, unquestioning.

It's a clumsy kind of dance. It's the kind best done by candlelight, stumbling around furniture, to some sentimental song. Maybe not made for cold nights like this.

But when have they ever cared about the right way of doing things? They have spent so much time carving their way out of the dark. People look at her, at Kaz, and see something that has spent too long there. But it is together that they emerge into the sunlight, together that they struggle to make it to morning, together that they see things without their cobwebbed shadows, as they really are. And for that, they'll never stop fighting.

She tilts her head up to let their foreheads rest against one another and slides her eyes shut. She doesn't need to see the moon to know that it's there, just another reflection. There are no crocuses here, no fireflies; only them in a silver world of mirrors, in a pure, clean cold.

The dance carries them in a graceless pattern, turning when they feel like it, swaying to a rhythm they never discuss. Inej feels a strange possessiveness, a need to hold on tight; if nothing else in this world is hers, he is. He chose this and he chose her. “Thief of mine,” she whispers, lips barely moving.

Kaz’s hand slides from her waist to the small of her back. She feels its heat there, enticing her closer still. “Yes, treasure?”

“Are you mine?” she says, her voice hoarse with closeness. She opens her eyes, and her lashes nearly brush his face. She says it again, coaxing him, goading him—not because she needs the answer, but because she wants it. Didn’t she tell him she was jealous? “Are you mine, Kaz?”

He hooks two fingers under the chain around her neck and toys with her rings, turning them back and forth. “All yours, Inej. Only ever yours.” He sounds half-drunk, more caught in her undertow than she’d ever believe he could be if she didn’t know her own power.

Some part of her, some part not made kind by the heat they’re sharing and his rapturous, whispered promise, is tempted to contradict that. To say that they wouldn’t need to be here if that were true. But sometimes they simply agree to be guilty and surrender to the intoxication of each other.

They’ve fallen still now, their shoulders gathering a fresh dusting of snow. Inej barely needs to move to press her lips to his, slowly, easily, like they’ve got all the time in the world. They have as much as they’re willing to take, she supposes. She cups his jaw, nudges his lips with her thumb, and when they part wider, she takes full and greedy advantage.

Kaz shifts to kiss a spot behind her ear, almost over her fluttering pulse, and she cranes her head back, exhales steam into the night air. “ *Me vrano* ,” she murmurs, his favorite of her names for him. *My crow.* He makes his way down the column of her throat and she says it again, whispered, for him and him only. *Yes.* She says it in her head, in a breathless whisper, again and again. For him, but for her too. *Yes, I want this. Yes, I chose this. Yes, you are mine, all mine.*

His hand slides to the nape of her neck and he angles her head back, kissing her more roughly. She'd thought they couldn't stand any closer, entwined as they are, but he pulls her against him, hips to hips, and Inej ignites. Their joint breaths feed something that the winter cannot kill.

It’s all the answer she needs. It’s more than she ever took the risk of hoping for. For once, it is enough, and it isn’t too much.

This could be the way they live. They could dance in these fields at night. They could kiss like the brazen teenagers they never got to be while Jordan sleeps upstairs. They could rock on the porch and mutter dour advice or proverbs or nothing at all. There are ways, Inej sees now, to find the rhythm of the waves on solid ground.

Tonight doesn’t have to be anything more—she doesn’t want to be watched over by whatever ghosts remain to haunt this place. But they could make it theirs. The fire in the hearth could

be the one inside her now.

Inej doesn’t say any of this, not yet. But she hopes. Defiantly, fiercely, getting back up again every time, she hopes. That has always been what made her dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

god I love characters who are omnipresent despite being dead before the story starts. none of them will be able to escape jordie until kaz chooses to say goodbye.

speaking of which, next chapter is another one that I've been cooking up for a while now, and I anticipate that it will require thinking caps, red pens, and floaty comment boxes.

comments clear my skin, water my crops etc <3

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz says goodbye.

Chapter Notes

hello all <3

so, it's been a tough week for this fandom. I've said what I have to say over on tumblr and insta, but just know that my heart is with all of you. the love for the grishaverse and its fans that I've seen over the past few days has been incredible. it's uniting, it's passionate, it's beautiful, and it's getting noticed. whether or not we save the show or get our spin-off, I will always be proud that I was a grishaverse fan right now.

consider this chapter to be me doing my part, and remember—they can't take this away from us <3

now, speaking of the fandom, I think it's time for shout-outs~

always_reading2027, I know I sound like a broken record about this, but I really do feel like a proud parent watching jordan grow up.

Lunarmoo, I giggled at "oo it's getting a little bit ~spicy~" because that's roughly what I thought as I was writing it.

maiden_of_crows, there is SO MUCH good stuff here, but especially the "he wasn't angry anymore. He just felt weary" because *yes*. I wrote a whole thing on tumblr about how kaz's way of processing grief (or lack thereof) is the way he handles physical pain and limitations—which is to say, he pushes through it until a) he can't anymore or b) it irreparably damages him, at which point he claims the damage as a strength and keeps moving.

thephonyqueenofengland, I 100% agree that jordan is doing a remarkable job of forging her own path, and I love that she has the option to choose a different life than her parents had.

Viva_La_Bohemia, poor alby has been through a lot. I'll have to be nice to him when the family returns to ketterdam, lol.

jzmn8r, I promise the fun little family trip is coming! not in this chapter, but it's coming! XD

Heiress_Kyr, more has arrived <3

cameliawrites, the way I see the last chapter with this one is that last ch. is inej and jordan moving forward but realizing they can't drag kaz with them, and this chapter it's kaz's turn to look ahead.

fitzsavorycracker, I like to think that by now I'm in it for the long haul :D

Pipperdoo, I'm not sure I want that much responsibility XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometime in the early morning, Inej's lips move close to his ear as they lay together. "Remember what we came here for."

And here Kaz had been hoping that the previous night meant some kind of truce. There is a reason he's never put much store by hope.

"I haven't forgotten," he replies. "I don't forget."

Inej gives a musing hum. He can feel the slight vibration of her voice in their closeness, the way they're pressed together beneath a cocoon of blankets. "That's the problem, isn't it?"

His father's old room has a window to the east, but the sky outside is still an ashy gray. Kaz was never expecting to sleep, but still—morning is a long way away yet.

<><><>

By the burnt-out end of the afternoon, the three of them are standing beneath the linden trees, though they're indistinguishable from any others when everything is crusted with ice. The stream in the back hasn't frozen, however, and Jordan is crouched on the frosted, solid mud bank, poking loose leaves and twigs with a stick as they float by.

Inej stands at Kaz's shoulder, and he finds that he is echoing her knife-straight posture. Once again, they are soldiers matching rank, though he feels rather more like he's facing a firing squad.

It's not that he doesn't want this. Hadn't he said it himself, the last time they were here? *It would get his memory out of my head.*

A legacy doesn't feel heavy at first, but the weight grows with time, Inej had responded. Much ado about legacy. It was the tip-off to him that Rollins had a son: *We want to create something that outlasts us,* Rollins had said, that night in Van Eck's office. But those kinds of dreams never come through for the criminals and Barrel rats, the ones who cheat their way into everything they own and will be cheated out of it the second they're gone. Pekka Rollins may well have lost his son by burdening him with a legacy. Kaz is not about to do the same.

He wasn't so far lost that he missed Jordan's uncertainty, something like fear, when she stood in his brother's room. He will not set that weight on her shoulders as long as he's conscious of it. But that means he has to lay it down somewhere else.

You told me you never got to bury him, but, Kaz, you've done it. He's six feet beneath a legacy he never wanted. A legacy you made for him.

Maybe he should be grateful that her voice is the loudest one in his head. It has always been the rope he clung to, the one tether that could drag him out of the dark. But her honesty cuts as surely as her blades.

"How about this one?" Jordan plunges her arms into the creek, hissing at the cold, and drags out a large stone, larger than a loaf of bread, eroded smooth by what must have been years in the water. She drops it in front of Kaz, where it crunches into the snow, and Inej moves to dry Jordan's hands with her scarf, pressing them between her own to keep them warm.

"Good. That's—that'll be good." Kaz swallows. He wants to leave. He wants to vanish into the depths of the Barrel for at least a week and not return until he's properly bloodied and vicious and everyone, himself especially, remembers that he's not a lost child anymore. He is the deadliest thing Ketterdam has ever seen. He's shaking for reasons that have nothing to do with the cold.

"Do you want us to stay?" Inej asks quietly. Never has he been so grateful for her quiet steps, her caution, the way she approaches even him with all the careful slowness of a guarded vault. But, then again, he deduced long ago that that's what he is. That's all that healing has been: picking the lock of his own mind. Connecting the gears on purpose and making them turn. They are rusty and groaning and thoroughly unpleasant to work with, but that's the only way to make them start again.

He thinks of all the times he has asked her to stay. *Stay in Ketterdam. Stay with me.*

But he has spent too much time making her and Jordan shoulder a grief too overgrown and poorly scarred for him to carry. This, he needs to do alone.

"I'll be back in soon," he says, turning away, towards the line of barren trees and the amber stream. And the stone, where it lays in the snow.

He should thank Jordan for it. But the words won't form.

Even shuffling over the snow, she and Inej make a silent pair; he doesn't hear them retreat. The cold is biting into his bad leg, and he half-wishes he'd brought his cane, but what for? To stand here, alone with decades of put-off melancholy? Maybe it's the snow, but everything feels slower. Or he's just dazed, drifting from reality the way that Inej does.

They'll need to engrave the stone somehow. There's probably a craftsman in town who could do it. But that means looking them in the eye and telling them what it should say.

It's a long walk to the tool shed; it's at the other corner of the back field, down the line of ash and elm trunks. But Kaz doesn't mind the pain so much. It's easier, more real than the storm

swirling in his head.

He wants to stop and go to his knees in the snow. He wants to lay in the stream until the cold closes over him. He wants to break something. He wants to take the next cart home.

The padlock is ancient enough that it practically comes apart in his hands. When he steps into the shed, he has to bend to keep from hitting his head on the ceiling. He never had to before. He was so much smaller.

Has he ever stopped to consider everything that he lost, outside of converting it into a price, to destruction, the only kind of currency he could take from Pekka Rollins? This place, this lost home, has been sitting on the other side of the balancing scale that weighed out *brick by brick,* and he's refused to look at it since.

Then again, is it worth estimating or regretting or grieving the loss? *There's only what is.* Isn't that what he's always said? And can he say he regrets it? Inej and Jordan and the house and the piano and *hutspot* in the kitchen and the Silver Six and Pekka Rollins sobbing on his knees?

Finally, on a bottom shelf thick with dust, he uncovers the hammer and chisel he's been looking for. Their weight drags his hands down. He steps down out of the shed and doesn't bother locking the door. Nothing here is worth stealing; he is the only person it matters to, lost two decades in the past.

The ache in his leg has grown sharp and rhythmic, driving in at every step. Good. Something has to remind him that he's alive. He hasn't forgotten Inej's words, her proverbs, *wounds with stitches,* but the wound is still there, and who is to blame? Maybe he has torn it open, but who left it there to start with?

Was there no one to protect you?

There was and every one of them failed. There's a reason he will keep Jordan safe if it kills him. He may be the destroyer, but he was broken first.

When he reaches the copse of linden trees on the corner, he stops. His hands are stinging with the cold, but something in him had rebelled against the idea of wearing his gloves for this.

He kneels in front of the stone, despite his bad leg protesting, despite the snow soaking through the knees of his trousers. He doesn't sketch out a design. He sets the chisel, raises the mallet, and makes the first strike.

"I got married," he says into nothing, not sure why he feels the need to talk at all. Only the wind responds. "Ambrose Janssen performed it. Lise's da. Always thought you'd end up with her. You kept bringing her the fresh tulips, only the orange ones." The stone is unforgiving and stubborn, but then again, so is he. "She's probably still here." Here and with a family of her own, likely having long since forgotten her childhood playmates, just like Pekka Rollins and everyone but Kaz himself.

How is everything different when nothing has changed?

“We adopted one of Inej’s rescues,” he goes on as he works, feeling wildly out of his depth. “Jordan. I—I gave her your watch.” He swallows, once, and the chisel strikes a rough patch. “You’d like her.”

He left his coat with Jordan, but the bitter air is like a strike to the face, like Inej digging her nails into his hand; it keeps him present, reminds him where he is.

Here, Kaz, take my coat. The shop won’t take it back anyway. Jordie’s voice. Or maybe it isn’t. Kaz doesn’t remember what his brother actually sounded like.

He was still wearing that coat when they dumped him and Jordie onto the Reaper’s Barge. The watch had been the worst part; it was days later when he found it in the coat’s pocket, and suddenly the anger that had been driving him on had died, a pinched flame. He’d curled up beneath a bridge and sobbed, rubbing his thumb over the *J.R.* on the back, until some boys had come along and beaten him until he couldn’t stand. He no longer remembers what for. Their touch had made him too sick to fight back, but he’d clung to the watch even still.

Another strike. Chips of rock sting his face. The dent still doesn’t look like a letter.

He wore that coat until the sleeves were too short and it no longer buttoned. It was ratty and battered and he got mocked for it exactly once, but he’d thrown the boy who tried it under the table with a rag from the bar shoved into his mouth and a shard of glass embedded in his eye. The day that one of the seams split was the day he went out and began planning the bank heist that ended up breaking his leg. He started wearing suits, mocking the merchers, after that. Then came the cane and then came the legend, and never once in all of it did Kaz look back. Never once did he search for the origin of the anger, or try to plumb the depths of what he’d lost. He didn’t have time for any hurt that wouldn’t serve him.

“You’re supposed to be here,” he says, strained, and maybe he’s finally lost it. Despite whatever speech he thought he was going to make, he finds that he’s angrier than he was expecting to be. “You and Lise should have kids running around. You should be showing Jordan the hiding spots in the attic. If you hadn’t decided to cheat the odds—thought we’d be kings—”

He’s the one on the crooked throne now, but what did it cost him? Alby Rollins was the price of his father’s greed. How long before Kaz has to pay the same toll?

The voice twists into something like a sneer. *It was for you, little brother. It was all for you.*

He could say the same thing, couldn’t he? Everything he’s done has been in Jordie’s name. How is it still not enough?

The hammer slams into the stone with a scrape, a scream, the only sound in this silent, empty goddamn world. These fields might be blank and clean now, but he remembers them painted red with his father’s blood, entrails spilling out like Saskia’s red ribbon. And it’s nothing, next to everything else he’s seen. He remembers their collie leaping into the stream, spraying him and Jordie when she shook herself off; when she had puppies in the corner of the stable, Kaz was the one who found them, the only one she would allow to touch them without snapping and biting. He filled vase after vase with crocuses for the kitchen table even though

they died after a few days. He threw rotten apples at the tree trunks with Jordie to see who could get the biggest explosion. He was afraid of the ducks even though they followed him everywhere.

He was a child. He was *just* a child.

So was I, Jordie's voice replies.

Again and again, Kaz drives the hammer down, teeth gritted, breath coming in clouds of steam. Dust sprays out towards him and turns the snow gray, like the sluice on city streets. *You fell for the illusion too,* Jordie murmurs. *You and that magician.*

The flash of a coin. The lights in Thirteen Zelverstraat. The light in his brother's eyes. Here and then gone. "You were supposed to protect me. You were supposed to—" He turns his face away as a chip of stone almost takes out his eye. The air is as frigid as ever, but there's sweat beading under his collar. "You were supposed to protect me . "

Kaz spent so long seeing his brother with all the worship and righteous anger of the boy who knew him, but he's grown now and understands that he was wrong. He can no longer see Jordie as anything but what he was. Foolish. Reckless. A child. Doomed from the start, maybe. Maybe one or the other of them held on too tight. Or maybe Kaz learned too quickly, too easily, to let go.

I couldn't have saved you. Jordie's voice speaks from somewhere behind his eyes, almost disappointed. *You couldn't have saved me.*

Kaz slams the mallet down so hard that he almost misses. "You failed me." He wants to stand, to pace, but instead he does what he has always done: he breaks and breaks and breaks. "You failed both of us." Again and again, the mallet falls. He imagines that the chisel is a scalpel, the kind Jordan might hold one day, that he's carving the heart from his own chest. "I wasn't ready. It wasn't time yet." His voice breaks over one of its many damaged places. "You were supposed to stay."

Stay in Ketterdam, he thinks. Stay with me.

How long before Inej is back on her ship, out courting death on the same waves that took his brother's body? Why does he always have to love the ones who can't stay?

Kaz's blows are growing weaker as his arms tire. His vision is blurring. He can't stop. He has to break something or he'll tear himself open. "You should be here. I shouldn't be be talking to a goddamn rock—if you hadn't—" He carves a misplaced chip out of the top of the *O* , leaving an extra dent. Fine. Let this headstone be just as wrong and misshapen as he is.

Oh, little brother. I was never going to make it.

He is an open wound, split and bleeding. Maybe they're both doomed. Maybe he was never meant to heal. "You could have," he insists, snarling. Perhaps he's gone mad and he's ranting to the air, unable to set this down no matter how he tries. "You sold everything for a dream. Don't run from the real price."

I'm not the one running, Kaz. Look at yourself.

He drops the hammer and chisel. He's partway through the first *A*. He presses his hands into the snow, where they chafe and sting, still not yet numb. Why won't they go numb? How long will it take to stop feeling?

The voice has become a snarl, and even though he's still assigning it to Jordie, he's not so sure. He's not sure of anything anymore. *You can keep shoveling dirt into my mouth, but the harbor will always be stronger.*

Kaz is going to carve a hole straight through this stone. He'll cleave it in two.

It's over, Kaz. Look it in the eye.

It's Inej all over again, telling him the fight has ended. But none of it feels over. If he gives up his anger at Rollins, he moves on to Jordie. And if he isn't angry with Jordie, than the only one left is himself.

Brick by brick, you tore it all down. Who are you now that you're standing in the rubble?

He's going under. He's already sinking. He's a corpse in the water. He is a lost child, and no one is left to hear him.

But what about the things he has made himself into? The things he's chosen to be? After all the risks and all the pain of becoming better, will he say that none of it matters, that he was just like Jordie, doomed from the start?

Kaz has never been much for fate. No reason to start today.

Who are you? Jordie's voice presses. *Who are you now?*

He is Jordan's da.

He is Inej's husband.

He is Jordie's brother.

"I'm alive," he says out loud, scooping the hammer and chisel out of the snow. A bead of sweat slips down his spine under his shirt. There's no one listening and there never has been, but he says it again. "I'm alive."

And someone finally hears the call, across decades: *I'm alive.*

Kaz himself has been ignoring that call. Every time he said Kaz Rietveld died, he let the screams of the child on the Reaper's Barge fall on another pair of deaf ears. But now he says, *I know.* He says, *I hear you.*

Kaz wades into the harbor and takes that boy in his arms. He is strong enough now to see him safely to shore. Jordie will no longer have to keep them both afloat.

He puts chisel to stone and continues carving his brother's name. He'll set it into something solid. He'll lay it down here, and like he should have done years ago, he'll give Jordie a place to rest.

Again comes the voice, but kinder. Younger. More like whatever memory he has left. *Didn't we do the same thing, Kaz? We both sold our hearts. You just have a chance to get yours back. Don't let it slip away. Don't let it vanish.*

Kaz is a thief and a liar with a crooked tongue and blood-soaked hands, but he will always keep his word. So he makes a promise now, just as he promised to Inej that he would make an effort to heal. He's going to cling to the man he has become. Jordan's father, Inej's husband, Jordie's brother—he will build a life that allows him to be all of those things. Anything else can be cut off and left behind. It will take time and planning and pain, but those things are all companions of his. He'll greet them like old friends.

The stone just says *Jordan* now, and before he goes on, Kaz has to marshal his breath and keep from looking at it too hard. His arms are aching. Pain emanates from his knee. He can feel the dust clinging to his face. But with every strike of the chisel, the mantra sings again in his head: *I'm alive.*

The letters are clumsy, ugly. *Johannus,* he writes with blow after blow. *Rietveld.* The chisel is a tattoo needle, piercing his arm.

And then it's done.

He sits back into the snow. The pain is still there. He hasn't gone numb yet. But after this, he'll go back into the farmhouse, and maybe Inej will have a fire going in the hearth. Maybe Jordan will have made hot chocolate.

And when he limps away from the stone, now reading *Jordan Johannus Rietveld,* he won't let go. He'll say goodbye.

He raises the chisel like a toast. "Goodbye, Jordie," he says. It's all he can get out before his throat closes. Maybe he'll get lucky. Maybe the tears will freeze on his skin.

Chapter End Notes

I have a feeling that the comments on this one are gonna be fun.

P.S. fun (?) fact: I sat down and wrote this chapter after getting the news that my grandma died. do I get my crazy ao3 author badge now? :P

Inej

Chapter Summary

The family shelters from the cold.

Chapter Notes

I've recently finished a re-read of this fic; I didn't change much, other than typos and a few contradictions, but I did work out the timeline for the last few chapters since some people were confused and edit some ages to line up with the seasons. This is bearing in mind that Jordan is a spring baby and Alby is a winter baby.

- Jordan is 13 and Alby is 14 when they meet at KU tour (fall sometime? Say November. So she he turned 14 the previous winter and she turned 13 in the spring)
- Kaz gets mad
- Skip maybe 6-7 months? Jordan is now 14. Kaz proposes.
- About a month later, in July-August, Kanej wedding and Kaz gives Jordan the adoption papers
- Skip another few months and Alby moves into KU. He turned 15 the previous winter and Jordan is 14 now.
- The same day, Inej sets off on another voyage.
- Jordan and Alby go on their date in late winter/early spring sometime. Jordan is almost 15.
- Time skip to late summer. Jordan is 15 now and talks to Kaz about her life plans.
- She and Inej leave on another voyage. They come back in late autumn/early winter and the Koen arc begins.
- In the present, Jordan is 15 and Alby is 16/turning 17.

also, thank you all for the kind words on the last chapter. I included the end note mostly as a “hehe funnie”, but you were all so wonderfully sincere and it actually helped a lot. so, I think you definitely deserve some shout-outs~

fitzsavorycracker, I hope this chapter heals you at least a little bit :)

GNM_dreaming_girl, it’s definitely going to be a process for kaz to figure out how it looks to let himself grieve, but that process is well underway for sure.

starsinyoureyes, welcome to the fic! I also fully agree that kaz is self-aware enough that I think it’s particularly difficult for him to recognize some of the misconceptions he has about himself.

PrincessKittyKat52, I like to think that her memory is, in some part, being honored in my writing <3

jzmn8r, I am sorry for your tears but also proud that the chapter achieved its goal, lol.

thephonyqueenofengland, that part is one of my personal favorites as well, so you have good taste :D

alwaysreading2027, you know how I love it when people point out their favorite quotes <3

WizardBronla, I see Kaz's arc in this story as a big, flashing reminder that healing isn't linear, and that's okay <3

Lunarmoo, I did laugh when the comment began with a warning that it wasn't going to be long, and then I scrolled and it just…kept going XD

eekabee, I see this new mantra as almost being a counter to "brick by brick," or a replacement for it.

Heiress_Kyr, I do think that this was a massive step for kaz in the process of moving on.

Rogues_Of_Ketterdam, I particularly liked your mention of inej and jordan knowing when to step back as opposed to when they should help.

Pipperdoo, I'm sorry for the tears…kinda XD

Typical_reader, I'm particularly happy that you mentioned the story keeping your interest—I know it's common for long fics to lose their way after a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej looks up at the sound of the front door just in time to see Jordan blustering into the house with all the force and coordination of a miniature blizzard. Her arms are full of firewood and a precariously balanced axe, and there's snow in her hair. "Got some!" she crows. She gets about two steps into tromping towards the hearth before Inej gives her a pointed look and she wriggles her feet out of her boots.

It's strange; while Inej has made a habit of being silent, one she has to consciously break, Jordan treats her stealth as more of an ability to use and discard whenever she sees fit. Just another way, perhaps, that her parents have succeeded in giving her a choice. If they're monsters, at least they are the kind that can keep her from having to become one.

Now that she is no longer in danger of tracking snow and mud all over the floors, Jordan goes over to stack the logs by the fireplace, setting the axe almost carelessly aside.

“Put that back where you found it,” Inej tells her with a slight smile, closing yet another barren cabinet. She shouldn’t be surprised by the emptiness of the house, but it’s still jarring, somehow, that the only things here are the things they’ve bought or brought with them. Still, she almost doesn’t mind being able to fill the place herself. Perhaps she is still a crow, after all these years, and so of course she must nest.

“In a minute,” says Jordan, and Inej can hear her rolling her eyes. Saints. Who ever thought it was a wise idea to bless her with a teenage daughter?

“Jordan.”

There is quite a bit of groaning from the front room, followed by shuffling steps and something clanging against the hook that Inej assumes once held a fire poker.

“And is that where you found it?”

“It’s not like anyone’s going to come back and look where it *was* .”

Inej’s lips press into a frown, and she looks to the side, hands stilled on the edges of the pot she’s just retrieved. She can’t see Jordan without turning all the way around, but she can feel the shift in the room’s atmosphere. She can imagine the avoidance in Jordan’s expression, the way she shrinks when met with the prickling itch of guilt.

There is a quiet sigh, and then, “Sorry, Mama.”

Don’t apologize to me, Inej thinks. She casts her eyes upwards and sends a silent prayer along with her gaze. “Leave it for now, *meja* ,” she says, summoning all the gentleness she has ever learned. “You don’t need to go back into the cold just yet.”

“Okay.” Jordan wanders into the kitchen, into Inej’s field of view. She rocks back and forth on her heels once, then says, “I went around to the side to get wood. I didn’t want to hurt the apple trees, but the ones in the back…”

Kaz. He still hasn’t come back in yet. Inej knows the reason she found herself in the kitchen, opening cupboards she knew to be empty; her restless hands are only an echo of her heart. She knows she promised long ago that she would not be the one to mend Kaz, that she could not fight this for him. They’re here because they both saw that they had reached a point he had to face alone. But that doesn’t seem to quiet the unease slithering inside of her.

At least the feeling is short-lived. Almost as soon as the concern arrives, it’s chased away by a rush of cold as the front door clatters open. Inej feels it prickle against her skin and turns, and there’s Kaz, red around the eyes and cheekbones, leaning on the doorframe to take the weight off of his weaker side.

He meets her eyes and gives the barest nod. She expects to see hesitance or resistance in the stern cut of his expression, the usual shame and struggle that comes when he allows her to see beneath his armor, but it’s nowhere to be found. He isn’t even weary, she realizes, just—settled. Unburdened at last, she dares to hope.

This whole trip, Kaz has been separated from the two of them. The wall has been satin at some points and brick and mortar at others, but up until this moment, it has never fully vanished.

“I got firewood,” says Jordan, looking between the pair of them.

To Inej’s continued surprise, Kaz looks over at Jordan as he steps inside, shutting the door as he goes, and says, “Thank you.” Inej spends a moment puzzling over what sounds so wrong about it—other than the sheer politeness—before she realizes: it’s not a puzzle at all. That’s the strange thing. There’s no hidden meaning, no angle. No illusion.

“Saints, Kaz,” she says, crossing the room to him. “Where did you leave my husband?”

He smiles at her then, his eyes red, his face streaked with some kind of dust. She hopes he knows how much he’s earned the smile she gives in return. “I believe I found him, actually.”

“Did you find my da, too, while you were out there?” Jordan pipes in. “Or should I go chop some more wood until I get frostbite and you feel bad enough to let me back in?”

“I don’t cave to guilt,” Kaz says roughly, but the smile lingers still. The three of them are standing in a loose, uncertain triangle—the strongest of shapes, should it be made solid. But none of them seem to be sure which move to make next.

Inej will have to ask, later, what exactly happened in the back corner of that field, beneath the linden trees. But she doesn’t think this is the time for it. Instead, she returns to the kitchen, to continue her previous endeavor—that being, making hot chocolate, which seems even more necessitated now.

“Hey!” Jordan’s voice rises from behind her. “If I can’t wear my boots in the house, neither can Kaz.”

He gives a dry, scraping laugh. “It’s my house.”

“Technically it’s Inej’s house too, then,” Jordan argues as Inej experiments with the kitchen’s rustic furnishings. “Isn’t that half the reason you guys got married? Finance benefits and all that?”

Inej’s lips press into a suppressed smile. If she’s not mistaken, she can hear the floorboards complaining as Kaz shifts uncomfortably. “Crows may not have any manners, but I believe you can learn new tricks, Kaz. Boots by the door.”

“If I wanted a sergeant to order me around I’d have joined up with the *stadwatch* ,” Kaz grumbles, but Inej can hear him complying and shuffling into the main room regardless. If she shift in the lighting is any indication, Jordan has managed to get a fire going.

“You should have,” says Jordan. “Every cold case in the last century would be solved right now. Or no one would actually be getting caught ‘cause you’d take all their bribes.”

“And then double-cross them,” Inej adds from the kitchen. She has managed to piece things together enough to get a pot heating on the stove, though she wishes they had cinnamon. It is,

unfortunately, a rare enough commodity that they're only able to get hold of it back in Ketterdam, usually helped by the Dregs' wealth and influence. While it heats, she joins Kaz and Jordan in the main room, where they're sitting by the fire, Jordan on the floor and Kaz on the bench in the corner with his bad leg stretched out. Rugs and anything upholstered, Inej imagines, would have been moth-eaten or dilapidated beyond repair years ago. That's something else they'll have to furnish themselves.

She sets her hands on Kaz's shoulders, and he covers one of her hands with his. Inej almost flinches—it's like ice. Well, at least Kaz is still stubborn in disregarding his own well-being. "I can't believe I'm saying this," she comments, "but should you have worn your gloves?"

He shakes his head once. "Not for that." His hair has grown out a bit on the sides, Inej notes idly, and she cards her fingers through the longer strands on top, scratching gently with her nails. She hears him give a soft exhale in answer; this, Inej happens to know, is one of his weaknesses, the secrets she protects most closely and uses solely to her own advantage.

"Is it ready yet?" Jordan asks. She's gotten some paper out and is stretched out on her stomach, scrawling lines that Inej can't read from where she's standing.

"Patience, *meja.* Besides, you look busy."

"You know we'll make it back to Ketterdam before a letter carrier does," Kaz observes.

Jordan gnaws on the end of the pencil for a moment. "I know. I'm just writing down some stuff I don't want to forget to say. About what it's like, being here."

To Alby, Inej infers. She'd wondered if being back here would make Kaz—or the both of them—more or less resistant to the idea of Jordan and Alby being together, but the nearness to old memories has yet to change her view of things: Jordan is bright and more than capable of handling herself, and Alby has a shocking amount of integrity in spite of the father who has effectively betrayed him. Besides, as long as Alby is in Ketterdam, she and Kaz can keep a nearer eye on things in case they take a sour turn.

In a way, Inej herself would like to capture and study this moment. It seems as fragile as the snowflakes clinging in crystal webs to the windows, like it will melt away with a touch. And yet, as the inside of the house warms, it only seems to grow more solid. It's a quiet day—no music just yet, and they talk only in fits and starts once the hot chocolate is handed out in steaming, clumsily made clay mugs—but the insulation that the snow provides is safe rather than claustrophobic. Like huddling beneath a quilt, clasping hands and whispering stories in the dark, hiding from the world in a warm pocket where monsters and shadows cannot reach.

Well, if she and Kaz are monsters and shadows, they're the only ones here. The burn of the chocolate is sweet on her tongue, richer than what they can get in the city, bitter around the edges despite its lack of spices. "This is one thing that the Kerch managed to do right," Inej muses over the rim of her cup, her breath momentarily parting the steam curling off of its surface. She's sitting at the foot of Kaz's chair now, her elbow propped on his good knee.

"Only this?" he asks.

Inej only hums and swallows another mouthful, unable to quite hold back a smile.

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Kaz is sitting on the end of the bed in the plain, soft shirt he sleeps in—when he chooses to sleep, that is—a notebook resting on one knee, rough charcoal pencil in hand. Inej pauses at his shoulder and glances at the page, taking a cue of permission from the fact that he doesn't move it out of her view.

It's a list:

Anders

Simon

Om

Andrei?

Betje?

~~*Espen*~~

~~*Kerstan*~~

Inej lifts the pen from his hand and leans down to scrawl another name at the bottom of the list: *Ria.*

He turns his head, though not far enough to actually look at her. "You don't even know what this is for." Amusement rolls through his rasp.

"You didn't only train me to collect information," she replies, setting the pen down and rounding the end of the bed to sit by his side. "You taught me to understand it. To connect the points."

"And like all your other skills, you turn it against me." Kaz gives an amused exhale that counts as a laugh, coming from him. "I told you never to become dangerous to me, didn't I?"

"I couldn't just let you spite me all those years without returning it in kind." Inej rests her head on his shoulder.

"Never something for nothing," Kaz murmurs. There's something about this closeness that Inej finds herself greedy for; after all those years of fighting and struggling and stumbling and failing to feel the barest brush of one another's skin, to be able to lean on him now, to be lifted and let down by each expansion of his breath, is a prize she's hungry to claim.

"So what scheme are you building?" she asks quietly, after a few silent moments slip by.

Kaz's shoulder shifts beneath her; perhaps he's turned his head. "I thought you knew."

“You aren’t the only one who can bluff.”

He gives a low laugh at that. But he doesn’t answer her yet; not until they’re laying facing one another, beneath the quilt they brought from Thirteen Zelverstraat, his clever lockpick’s fingers twisting a lock of her hair back and forth, does he part his lips and whisper the idea. The one he found beneath the linden trees, fallen with a fresh blanket of snow. The prize doesn’t come in the form of *kruge* , he tells her, but of this place. Of something like peace.

Inej slips a hand beneath Kaz’s shirt and splays it out over his heart, where his pulse moves against her palm. This feels like a premonition, she thinks, of what that peace could be.

Chapter End Notes

there’s a sneaky CK reference in here—you get waffles if you find it ;)

also, I really want fanart now of the three of them having their cozy little family moment. or frankly any fanart of this fic.

Alby

Chapter Summary

Alby meets Jordan when she returns to the city with news.

Chapter Notes

we are scarily close to 100 chapters and I am Not Okay with that. you have 3 weeks to prepare for the sappy thank-you that I'm inevitably going to write. for now, I'll keep the thanks on the shorter side with some shout-outs~

arillusionist, you get all the waffles for catching that little reference!

thephonyqueenofengland, I really wanted that chapter to capture feeling of coming inside from the snow and bundling up somewhere safe and warm; there's nothing like being cozy while the world is cold outside.

maiden_of_crows, I am simply here to deliver your kanej-related heart's desires, lol.

Heiress_Kyr, I am such a sucker for family banter (which probably didn't even need saying.)

Lunarmoo, I have thoroughly enjoyed witnessing your re-read this week (along with all the others that people are doing as they theorize, lol.)

fitzsavorycracker, I am sending love right back to you!

Typical_reader, glad I could give you some comfort with a touch of family fluff :)

jzmn8r, I too am screaming and crying over the cuteness.

Rogues_of_Ketterdam, hot chocolate, when promised, must always be delivered.

cameliawrites, I love that phrasing—kaz in his growth era XD

WizardBronla, to be honest, I don't know how I'm managing this either.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alby turns seventeen in the dead of winter, and it’s. Well. He doesn’t want to say that it could be worse, because that would mean imagining how much worse it could be.

At least Jordan is back in the city now. With no Koen, no further letters from his father—and he really isn't sure if he's grateful or not—and Jordan being gone with her parents, the last week has given Alby far too much time alone with his thoughts. One would think that at least all of the time to deliberate would have lead him to understanding….well…anything, but if anything he is more lost than ever.

His father killed Koen to protect his legacy. That's all that Alby is to him; a legacy, not a boy. Not really a son. Alby thought he'd stepped off the path that was set for him, but now the path is gone altogether—where is he meant to go next? Spring is coming soon, with summer close on its heels. He isn't at all sure that he can afford to stay in the city, but where is he meant to go if not home?

Despite the memories attached, the Crow and Cup contains exactly the peace and familiarity that he's been seeking. It is kept a sophisticated, restrained sort of quiet, apart from the necessary clinking of dishes, the whisper of pages turning, and the soft hiss and grind of machinery.

He knows how he must look when he steps through the doorway—like a hopeful hound, nose in the air, searching a breeze for its target. But he can't help looking for Jordan; after a week of her absence, he's desperate for something familiar, some landmark that he knows in an entirely strange land void of signposts and trails. She is the only thing he can be certain of. She is all he has left to believe in.

Luckily, his eyes have not lost their skill for finding Jordan; she's standing by the counter, talking to one of the waitresses, a tall, narrow-boned Zemeni girl with a multitude of long, thin braids in neat rows. Most of Jordan's frame is swallowed by a coat in deep crimson wool and a loosely-wound charcoal-striped scarf, but Alby can still recognize the readiness of her stance. She turns towards him as he approaches and gives a little wave.

Something inside of Alby that has been aimless and wandering for the last week pauses and settles. He realizes that he's smiling.

"Oh, Ria, last thing—Kaz wants you at the Crow Club tonight," Jordan says to the waitress, reaching out to Alby without looking at him and flexing her hand as if to grab something. Alby takes the signal (and her hand).

The waitress barely spares Alby a glance before giving Jordan a confused look. "But I'm not a dealer."

Jordan shrugs, casually tucking her and Alby's joined hands into her coat pocket. It's surprisingly warm. "Kaz works in mysterious ways."

The waitress does what most people do, as Alby has gathered, when confronted with Kaz Brekker and his personal idiosyncrasies; she throws up her hands, heaves a great sigh, and disappears into the storeroom, presumably resigned to follow orders.

"What was that all about?" Alby asks. Frankly, as long as he can drink in the safety of Jordan's presence, the solidity of her voice, he doesn't much care what they talk about.

“It’s not like he tells *me* either,” Jordan gripes. “Just that he wanted to talk to her, and of course *I* get to be the errand girl, even though we’re not even really pretending I’m Dregs anymore…”

She starts meandering towards an open table, and Alby, unwilling to break their link, trails after.

Jordan pauses by a corner table beneath the window and gives him an odd sideways look. “No green today?”

Alby glances down at himself. He is, in fact, wearing mostly grey. It matches the landscape as well as his mindset; Ketterdam as a whole is gray in the winter. Though, here in the Lid and in the richer districts, the landscape outside of the wide windows glitters silver.

“No,” he says, shifting his weight. He extracts his hand from Jordan’s pocket in order to pull out her chair; this is the one bit of chivalry that she allows him, as long as it comes with the clarification that he’s doing it out of kindness and not necessity.

Jordan grins up at him. “Can I call you a prince now?”

Alby takes his own seat. He isn’t sure it would even be accurate anymore—he has a feeling that any inheritance or claim he has to a proverbial throne is gone now, even if by his own choice. “If it makes you happy,” he says, attempting a smile.

“I’d rather come up with something new,” she says, resting her chin in her cupped hands. There’s a glitter in her eyes, like frost on the windows catching a few meager scraps of sunlight. She tilts her head to the side. “Hm. What should I call you?”

“My name is a good start,” says Alby, but he can’t help the barest of smiles. As menacing as he knows Jordan is, she looks impossibly cute burrowed into her overlarge coat and scarf.

“How about something in Suli?” she says, in the voice that she uses when concocting some new sort of trouble. “But I’m not telling you what it means.”

“As long as I can guess.”

Jordan taps her fingers against the table for a moment, her gaze slipping away from him. One of the waitstaff comes by and sets their drinks down in front of them—hot chocolate for Jordan, coffee that’s mostly milk for Alby. Jordan seems to take advantage of the distraction for an extra moment, then, still looking away, she says, “How about *ljubavi?* ”

“It sounds nice,” says Alby, which is an understatement. He rarely hears Jordan speak her native tongue, but it transforms her voice—it suffuses her tone with new warmth. “But I don’t get to know what it means?”

“Nooope,” Jordan says, popping the ‘p’. She has acquired a whipped cream mustache when Alby wasn’t paying attention.

"Dear?"

"Ugh."

“Sweet?”

“As if.”

“Hey.”

“Alby.”

“Jordan.”

They stare at each other for a moment. Alby enjoys the excuse to admire her.

“I should get to give you one too,” he says. His Kaelish stubbornness is much more easily forgotten than it is ignored.

“Go ahead,” says Jordan, leaning closer to him. Alby considers this an attempt at sabotage.

Later, when he turns this conversation over and over in his mind in an endless wheel, he’ll blame her for scattering his thoughts with her steady gaze, her lowered lashes. He’ll blame the world for making him feel like she’s the only real or certain thing that remains. He’ll blame himself for vowing in that back alleyway to go all in on Jordan, to forget caution and concern and bet everything he has on the one thing he believes in. All of this is to say that, before he can think too hard about it, he suggests ““ *Mo ghrá?* ”

He’s safe as long as Jordan doesn’t find out what it means.

“You should speak more Kaelish,” Jordan says, softer, more slowly. Alby isn’t sure he wants them to be the typical young pair who kiss over coffee-shop tables, but Ghezen, he’s certainly considering it.

Unfortunately, this idea is interrupted before he can act on it. “Oh, right! You’re old now.” Jordan digs around in the pocket their hands weren’t just in and pulls out a trim little wristwatch, the band done in walnut leather. Alby’s name is engraved on the inside. “Happy birthday,” she crows, holding it up in her palm.

Alby takes it tentatively, running his fingertips over the engraving, but even as he’s doing so, he says, “Thanks, but I—I don’t know if I can—”

Jordan pushes his hand closed over the watch. “You can and you will,” she says, giving him a look that he knows by now not to challenge. “We visited lots of craft people while I was gone. Besides, it’s payback for the bracelet.” She shakes one wrist at him, and Alby sees a string of wooden beads poking out from her coat sleeve.

He stares. He’d forgotten all about that, honestly. But he’d sent her a number of gifts during their early years of writing back and forth, generally besotted with the wild pirate of a girl he’d met once and fallen for entirely, probably making some desperate attempt to win her heart. He still barely believes that it worked.

“Thanks,” he says, more softly now.

Jordan takes his hand in both of hers and fastens the watch around his wrist. Alby has the urge to hold his breath; her hands are warm, her touches light, and it sends his thoughts into a complete spiral—leaves caught up in a gust of wind, if the leaves were particularly pleased about this state of affairs.

Eventually, still focused on the buckle of the watch, she says, “I’m going to the university next year.”

While he is very familiar with Jordan’s methods, including the unannounced stating of startling information, Alby still finds himself surprised by this. He looks up at her in a sudden snap. “You are?”

Now Jordan meets his eyes, and she is still enough to look like a painting—a splash of scarlet, a wine stain against the diamond-checked wallpaper. She keeps her hands folded around Alby’s. “I’m going to be a medik,” she says, and serious as she’s trying to be, a small and lovely smile curves her lips. “I figured it out. So next year I’ll be at school with you.”

Alby’s hands tighten around hers. At least if he has to be lost, Jordan found her way just in time. He drew her a map once, so maybe now she can guide him in return. “You’re sure?”

Jordan nods once. He wishes he’d brought his sketching things; the city has summoned what little light it has to paint her like an icon—resolute in bronze. “Whatever life I want,” she says, and the smile grows, “it’ll have you in it.”

Alby finds himself looking down at his mug of coffee, embarrassed for reasons he can’t seem to explain. He doesn’t want to admit how long he’s been waiting for her to say that very thing. “Is it strange if I say I’m proud of you?”

“Nah.” Jordan ducks down to meet his eyes. “I’m proud of me too.”

Frankly, damn stereotypes and witnesses and the general public. Alby leans across the table, hands twisting into Jordan’s scarf, and kisses her, tasting chocolate on her mouth. Chocolate and whipped cream. She gives a small, startled laugh and kisses him back with her own particular brand of enthusiasm.

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They wind up sitting on a bench outside, wrapped in Jordan’s scarf, flushed from more than the cold. She tells him about the trip in bits and pieces; Alby feels as if he takes the empty spaces more to heart than the rest, as if they are words in their own right, reminding him that her parents don’t trust him and likely never will.

“I almost felt like I belonged there, by the end,” she says. “Like I wasn’t trespassing.”

“As if you care about trespassing,” Alby remarks, watching idly as a mother ushers her two small sons away from a shop window full of sweets.

“I did there. That was the weird part.”

The family Alby was watching disappears around a corner. He wonders if he dares to take the luxury of letting his mind glaze over—is it wrong of him, to take any chance to forget about Koen, about his father? Should he be thinking about it? Will it be worse if he doesn't?

"Do you think you're going to go back?" he asks.

"I'd like to," says Jordan, tugging on her end of the scarf. She nestles closer to Alby. "I wish I could just invite you home. We should have a proper party."

There it is again—the tell-tale signs of omission, of crossed-out words. Alby is too weary to be frustrated with it.

"This is enough celebration for me." Besides, he isn't quite ready to face her parents yet, not after everything that happened the last time they were at this particular eatery. In fact, he'd almost suggested that they meet somewhere else—it's just that all of the cafes near the University are marked by his memories of Koen. And this one is quiet.

"If you say so."

"I do."

Jordan hums and rests her chin on his shoulder, looking up at him with eyes as wide as moons. Alby knows how sickeningly sweet they must look, probably insipid to passers-by, but he can bear the guilt in order to reap the safety of Jordan's presence. Maybe forgetting isn't so bad. He'll be inspid if it keeps him from losing his mind.

Lost he may be, without a family or mission or a path to keep to, but at least he can whisper to Jordan after kissing her again, slowly, shyly— *Mo ghrá.* She answers *ljubavi,* then laughs and dares him to do it again, and he does and keeps doing it; after all, he's safe as long as she doesn't find out. As long as she doesn't know what he's saying.

The trouble is that it seems so obvious—he feels as if it's written on his face, as if it's spoken in the *da-dum* cadence of his heartbeat. If Jordan looks at him too long, or puts her ear to his chest, he's afraid she'll know it at once.

Da-dum. *Mo ghrá. My love.*

Chapter End Notes

apologies for this one being a little short; the two weeks after thanksgiving are miserably busy, but once we get a bit further into december I should be back in form.

also, about the endearments- I apologize to any irish readers if my web searches have mislead me, and as for the suli word, it came up a few chapters ago if anyone remembers.

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz visits the Church of Barter.

Chapter Notes

I am back! apologies for the week off; finals were kicking me down pretty severely, but I am back in action with some shout-outs~

FrenchLo_1995, hopefully this notification makes you just happy :)

Birdyyy1, one of these days someone should make a Chrome extension that lets you give kudos more than once, lol.

maiden_of_crows, I do love me a good alby/kaz parallel.

GNM_dreaming_girl, you might actually get your hopes for Jordan to be happy—I think she's on a good path.

jzmn8r, the only hint I will give about what Jordan is saying is that it's highly ironic from a reader's POV.

Heiress_Kyr, congrats on finding all the names!

cameliawrites, I can always count on your comments to pick up on the underlying emotions and dynamics. these poor kids have a lot going on, but at least they have each other <3

thephonyqueenofengland, I thought they deserved to be cute and cuddly for a bit.

Typical_reader, scream away, lol

always_reading2027, is it bad to admit that sometimes I squeal while rereading these? they're just so cute TT

fitzsavorycracker, I love this comment *so much* because YES, these two are finally coming into their own!

Though Inej is no longer Kaz's spider, she has taught him her way of spinning a lovely web. The trick is to never quite put the trap in the very center.

Kaz is reminded of this when he finds the note on his desk, penned in her fine, sweeping scrawl: *Church of Barter. Four bells.*

Will he make himself willing prey? Frankly, he might do it just for the gratification of seeing Inej weave a scheme of her own. Besides, the only thing she ever seems to trick him into doing is becoming a better man—aside from the times he has annoyed her, in which case she likes to leave him in predicaments involving far too many stairs.

He pockets the slip of paper and snaps up his hat on the way out the office door. It's three bells now and the walk isn't long, but he has to account for interruptions along the way.

The interruption, once he arrives downstairs, comes in the predictable shape of Jordan. She is once again slumped on the couch, grinning at him over the top of a newspaper.

Kaz reflects grimly that he's likely to beat his father's record for going gray and it will be entirely her fault. "Yes?"

The top half of the newspaper flops down to reveal the rest of Jordan's face. "You didn't tell me *you* were the one who botched the heist on that mercher wife's jewels. Saints, leaving the window cracked and everything?"

Kaz stalks past and grabs the paper from her, crumpling it and tossing it into the fireplace on his way to the door. After all he's done to build up his legend, he has essentially become the story that merchers use to scare their children and the scapegoat on whom they pin their losses. For some mystifying reason, this means that he has been accused of a number of shamefully done but somehow unsolved crimes—as if the incompetence of the *stadwatch* is some mark of his singular skill as a thief. Kaz has never put much store by the opinions of others, but it's an incredibly backhanded compliment at best.

"If they catch whoever *did* ," he says, pausing by the door, "I'll visit him in Hellgate and cut out his tongue unless he clears my name."

"Your name is clear as mud," Jordan points out, "with or without the jewels. Anyway, it could be a *she.* Girls can be bad thieves."

Kaz pushes the door open with his cane. "Know it from experience, do you?"

Unfortunately, he has to leave before he can enjoy too much of Jordan's irritated sputtering, or else he'll give her an in to respond. Not that this conversation won't continue when he returns.

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The Church of Barter is just across an intersection of canals from the Zelver district, but watching the other passengers on smallboats crowd away from him as if that'll stop him from

stealing their finery (or their souls) is, frankly, amusing. In addition, though Kaz has never been one to seek comfort, the pragmatic part of him says that whatever surprise Inej has set is best greeted in as little pain as possible.

Perhaps the Sankta of the Sea has decided that the only way to make her heathen husband step near a church is to disguise it as a scheme. Much good it will do him. Kaz doesn't expect he'll be smited or absolved as soon as he steps through the doors, but there are those who would certainly hope for either.

He steps off of the smallboat onto the cobbled path that lines the canal and winds between two imposing legislative buildings with balconies ringing their upper floors. Walking through the city is different now that he's no longer fighting off the memories. It's a reflex, like an unexpected touch, and his instincts warn him to lash out, to shove it away, but Inej has taught him the art of stillness. He holds himself with the kind of willpower he has been nurturing for years now and allows himself to remember.

The city is littered with memories like it is with refuse. He can see down the broad, main connecting street to the Exchange, where he spent days waiting and wandering around its walls while Jordie sought after jobs and tried to get advice from the runners. Maybe he and Kaz would be respectable merchers now if he'd succeeded. Or maybe they would have been someone else's fool, further down the line.

He reaches the front of the church and walks up the broad, polished steps alone; they have divots worn into them where generations of sinners have stepped. Strange that they'd all follow the same pattern. Kaz steps outside of them to be contrary.

There's no shutting the massive double doors quietly, and Kaz doesn't bother. The cathedral seems noticeably more massive when it isn't buzzing with delegations from every country and a mob of Barrel brawlers. In fact, at first sight it's utterly empty; the religious Kerch prefer to do their worship in the form of work at this hour of the day, he presumes.

If business is holy, they ought to canonize me.

The corner of Kaz's mouth lifts in a wry smirk. Ketterdam is a city made of illusions. From the gambling halls to the mercher's mansions, even between the walls of Hellgate, everything is made fine and shiny so that it'll sell, but the gilt flakes away and the glamour is painted on.

It certainly stands in contrast to the rough simplicity of the altar, the First Forge. Kaz walks down the main aisle, the strike of his cane echoing off of the stone, and the silence swells in between each ricochet of sound. The clock tower chimes four bells.

Near the end of the aisle, he realizes he's not alone.

In one of the pews in the very first row, a rusty head is bent over something—a book, Kaz thinks at first, but it reveals itself to be a sheaf of loose papers as he moves forward.

Kaz reaches the end of the aisle and stands directly beside the boy in the pew, waiting. Is this why Inej sent him here? In some attempt to make peace?

Alby Rollins looks up and flinches slightly, knocking his papers out of their neat stack. He seems to use collecting them as an excuse to not look at Kaz. “Ghezen,” he mutters.

Kaz glances sideways at him. “Calling on the master of the house, are you?”

“I’m not particularly religious,” the boy replies, tapping his pencil against his knee. Now he does look up from the papers. He’s mostly swathed in a heavy gray coat and fraying scarf of the same shade. “Though I guess that doesn’t really explain why I come to work here.”

It doesn’t explain why he was at Zentsbridge, either. Then again, so was Kaz, and he has no intention of talking about it. He remains still, hands folded over the head of his cane, and thinks of a gunshot echoing through these high ceilings. His eyes trail past the high windows with their view of the distant Zelverstraat and through the arch, down the pinky nave, where he knows a certain chapel lies. Where Pekka Rollins knelt and sobbed to save his son from choking on earth, alone in the dark. But that very son sits beside Kaz now, and Jordie is the one he ended up burying, as much as he ever could.

“Even if I don’t believe, Koen did,” Alby goes on, and Kaz wonders if it’s directed at him or the air. He’s hardly a welcoming confidant. But people like to see silence as an open door. “He believed that work was prayer, like they do here. So this is as close as I get to praying for him.”

Their sacrilege is the only thing they can agree on, and yet they keep meeting in these positions of false prayer.

Kaz knows the unspoken question: *Why are you here?* He could say that he, too, is making an offering to the lost. But that’s not a lie worth telling. And it’s not a truth he’s willing to share.

“You can only do so much to please your ghosts,” he says. It’s not so different from what he said before. *Keep your anger for the dead.*

Alby bends nearer to the paper to frown at a few lengthy words—formulas, by the look of them—then draws a neat strike through them. Sitting up again to look at it from a different angle, he says almost like an afterthought, “Was it worth it?”

Kaz quirks an eyebrow. “What?”

Alby brushes away some eraser dust. “Ruling the city. Becoming a rich man. There’s a price on everything here.”

Standing still has begun to ache. Kaz crosses in front of the pew towards one of the windows, stained glass and at least three times his height. Watery sunlight pools around him and mists his face. “Why? Want to try your hand at it? You’d be no different than any other sap coming to Ketterdam.”

Maybe it’s just this place, or the memories of the auction being fresh in his mind, but he hears Rollin’s voice ring between his ears. *Your brother fancied himself a trader, wanted to be a merch and get rich like every other nub that steps off a browboat in the Barrel.*

“In a way,” says Alby. Kaz glances back at him. “But not for the sake of it. I don’t want to be what my father was. If there’s a price on everything, then human loss is only one of many things you can sell.”

“You need a reason,” says Kaz, looking back out the window. The Ketterdam skyline is blurred by the stained glass, but he can see the dark line of the harbor in gaps between the buildings.

“I have one. I’d like to make a donation to the university in Koen’s name. Maybe for them to put in a new history building with proper heating. The Koen Anholts school of history.” There’s a hesitant whisper of pages against one another.

Kaz almost laughs aloud. “You’ll have to get rid of some of that decency first.” He cocks his head to the side, then says, “When people were calling your father the King of the Barrel, back when he was rolling in *kruge,* he said you were all that he had. Sounded like madness to me.” Especially since he’d been deep in the process of dismantling that empire.

“He ended up going mad anyway. Sure we were being watched, checking all the locks fifty times.” When Kaz turns back, Alby is clutching the edges of his paper, which is threatening to tear. “Anything to get me back. But you knew that before I did.”

The bite of accusation is there in his tone, but Kaz lets it be. He had his reasons; he has cut away and buried the ones that weren’t for the best. “I’m not here to be your father’s messenger.”

Alby gives an irritated exhale and scribbles something else on the paper.

“Is that the work you do to honor your friend?” Kaz asks, brows raised. His tone is dry, but he has never been the nurturing type and has no interest in it now. “Meaningless equations?”

“They’re not meaningless, just senseless,” Alby gripes. “I’m studying life and living things, not chemicals. But we’re learning about the smallest bits of life now, so they’re having us cap it off by studying different diseases. Pleasant stuff.”

Kaz has a functional grasp on spelling and hasn’t found a set of numbers that he can’t sort out in his head, but he only loosely sees the association that Alby is making. “Quite the offering,” he says.

“I don’t think Ghezen counts it as work if it’s pleasant,” says Alby, returning what could pass for an imitation of Kaz’s humor. “Anyway, we’re meant to be designing potential cures or preventions for these things, ways to fight them off, you know. Even though none of us are medical students, and fully trained mediks haven’t figured out some of these…” He sighs.

“Ask Jordan for help,” says Kaz wryly. Her name makes the air between them snap taut for many reasons, but he has never been one to avoid discomfort. Besides, this is easier than memories and false prayers, even if he still doesn’t know why Inej sent him here.

“I might have to.” Alby taps his pencil against the paper again. “I decided to make this more difficult for myself. Ghezen knows why.”

Kaz simply gives him a querying look, frankly unsure as to why he's still entertaining this.

"I chose firepox. I wouldn't have if I'd known more—some of the materials I think I'd need just *don't* naturally combine. I don't know how I'm going to do this." Alby gnaws on the end of his pencil.

Kaz is still by the window, the side of his face turned to Alby. Backlit as he is, he doesn't know if the kid would notice the small, round, mostly faded scars that mark his cheekbone and poke out above his collar.

He thinks of those scars burning, of huddling beneath a bridge. He thinks of the dealers at the Emerald Palace marked with patches of decay, of the wail of plague sirens. *That is the sound that death makes when she comes calling.*

"Could a Fabrikator do it? Or a chemist?" he questions, eyes pinned on those empty spaces in the skyline.

"Maybe both together, if I gave them my work and could fill in the gaps about how this thing works, but I'm neither and have neither, so…" Alby drags a hand through his hair.

Kaz knows how he must look. He can hear Inej's voice in his head. *Scheming face.* "Not so fast," he says. Maybe this is nothing. Maybe it's the first pin and the rest of the lock is about to fall apart in his hands.

Work is akin to prayer. He thinks of himself chiseling that river stone, kneeling, ranting to the empty sky.

Maybe this *is* nothing. Or maybe it's an answer to a false prayer.

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The Van Eck mansion happens to be near the Church of Barter, so Kaz makes a detour. He has a note to leave for Jesper and Wylan, containing two things:

One, that he's sending them a student who may become a houseguest, if they're as fond of taking in strays as he suspects.

And two, that being reminded of Kuwei's auction has had the unfortunate side effect of giving Kaz an idea. They'll have to modify parts and pieces to align with the circumstances he has in mind, but he's still going to need a vial of poison and an impossible shot.

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej finds safety in a lazy morning.

Chapter Notes

hi guys, so we made it to chapter NINETY-NINE and that's just insane. um. especially considering that my outline currently includes 114 chapters. so basically...we're close. I'm just as excited as I am scared, though; I've been planning this ending for about two years now and it's going to be *epic*.

also also, happy holidays! consider this self-indulgent fluff my little gift to you all. there's some plot in there if you really squint.

now, of course, it's time for some shout-outs~

Heiress_Kyr, if I have one regret, it's that we didn't get to spend more time with Koen.

FrenchLo_1995, your math is mathing :D

fitzsavorycracker, kaz brekker getting along with kids (sort of) is possibly the biggest piece of character development in this fic jsbsfbsfhsfhg

maiden_of_crows, I love your description of the *ache* in the Kaz/Alby dynamic because...yeah. that's the perfect word for it. there's so much hurt in and around them and it just. I write coherent things but behind them is just me throwing myself at the walls like spaghetti.

jzmn8r, I love writing kaz's interactions with the teenagers because now it's just him going...."I was HOW OLD when I did WHAT NOW"

thephonyqueenofengland, I 100% agree that Wesper are going to love this kid.

cameliawrites, obsessed with how you tied in the themes of legacy and healing here because YES. the parallels in kaz and alby's current journeys are....very much on purpose lol.

Typical_reader, I do love to sprinkle in a bit of mystery here and there.

eekabee, and I'm loving your comments <3

Pipperdoo, why thank you *takes a bow*

Viva_La_Bohemia, Kaz likes to think he's calling the shots, but unfortunately he is subject to the will of a writer who does things because they would be funny XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inej has learned to count the small blessings. Today begins with one in the shape of a slow morning.

She is woken in the small hours by Kaz moving about the room; while most wives would complain, she is grateful that he never slips into bed beside her without waking her first. He purposefully shuts the door to their room with a solid *thunk,* and doesn't muffle the sound of his cane against the floorboards as he disassembles his immaculately tailored suit and sets aside his legend for the night. When he comes to lay beside her, he is loose-clothed and gloveless, stripped of his reputation.

Inej gives a soft groan when he lifts the quilt, letting in a rush of cold air that makes the skin on her legs prickle. Spring is certainly on its way, but not without a number of false starts. "That's your worst cruelty of the night," she complains.

Kaz settles beside her, facing her so that none of his movements surprise her, and tucks one arm under his head. What she can see of his face gives the barest of smiles. "I could have dismembered a troublemaker at the Crow Club. Slowly."

"Still more forgivable," Inej gripes, but even as she says it she's shifting nearer to him beneath the quilt. Kaz begins to run a hand through her hair, but when his cold hand settles at the nape of her neck, she gives a quiet gasp and arches away like a cat that doesn't want to be pet. "Saints. Your hands are freezing."

"Not even your Saints can save you from the frigid touch of Dirtyhands," Kaz teases, his eyes nearly black in the darkness of their room. "They say he wears the gloves to prevent turning his victims to ice."

"If he truly had that gift, he'd never avoid using it," Inej replies, nestling her forehead against Kaz's shoulder and inhaling the ink-and-coffee scent of him. She allows her eyes to fall shut.

"You seem so certain of his character."

" *Shevrati,"* Inej says sleepily, though it's muffled by his shirt. Despite his icy extremities, Kaz radiates body heat, and she curls closer to him like a sunflower seeking its namesake. "You should keep kinder hours."

"I'll send a note to the other Barrel bosses and tell them my wife objects to my schedule," says Kaz, the arm that's beneath her coming to cradle her closer. His hands have warmed enough by now that she allows it.

"You should. And they ought to listen. You have a very formidable wife." Even if she doesn't look or sound like it just now, heavy-eyed and loose-haired, without her knives and cutlass.

“I know I do.” Kaz laughs quietly, and she can feel it in the way his chest rises and falls beneath her. This all feels far too safe.

When Inej was small, though she wasn’t afraid of much, she was terrified of the dark. She’d refused to leave her bed at night, believing that as long as she stayed burrowed into the blankets, the monsters couldn’t reach her there.

Of course, the real monsters hadn’t cared for her rules. They dragged her from her bed one lazy morning regardless.

She and Kaz are both real and solid, she reminds herself; their ghosts cannot find them under the covers, not while they are protected by one another’s arms. They are both going to stay right here.

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When Inej next awakes, dawn is gray in the windows, and they’re in roughly the same position, her head pillowed on his chest. She blinks the blur of sleep from her eyes to see Kaz already looking at her, seeming almost relaxed. His face rests in something like a smile when he isn’t disciplining it. It’s a look that has taken some getting used to, and she still finds herself surprised to see it on him.

“What are we doing for Jordan’s sixteenth?” she questions.

Kaz gives a soft huff of a laugh, and his breath ruffles the soft hairs at her hairline. “No proverbs to greet the sunrise, my little Suli idealist?”

“You’ve made me too practical. So should we do it here?”

He cards his fingers through her hair, fingernails lightly dragging over her scalp, and draws a lock of it forward over her shoulder. “That depends on the guest list.”

Alby. Inej hasn’t seen Kaz since she left him that note the day before. Perhaps she was meddling with fate more than she should by arranging a meeting between Kaz and Alby, but after she’d noticed the pattern in Alby’s visits to the Church of Barter, it had seemed like the best way to help them discover their commonalities. Still, even in the best-case scenario, she doubts that Alby could do anything that would endear Kaz to him enough to reveal Thirteen Zelverstraat, at least not yet.

“I’m sure Jesper and Wylan wouldn’t mind hosting,” she says, toying with the buttons at the collar of Kaz’s loose, soft shirt. She tilts her head up with a slight smile. “Especially not if I ask.”

“I know you’re the favorite,” Kaz replies, sounding only a little annoyed about it. The scrape of his voice is rougher in the morning, and Inej feels the vibration of it in his chest.

“Then I’ll ask,” she says, holding still and feeling Kaz breathe. She wonders if he is tracking her breaths, too, reminding himself that she is alive. The chill in the air remains, pressing in on them from the outside, but here, tucked together beneath the quilt, they’re cocooned in

warmth. A cold morning can be a blessing, she thinks, when it brings with it this pearlescent haze. Maybe safety is shared body heat. Maybe it's the silvery dawn spilling onto the floor.

Kaz shifts slightly but doesn't move away from her. "Did you know about his project?"

Being married to him will develop a skill for inference like nothing else. "I expected it was schoolwork." The significant part, to her mind, was that Alby Rollins had chosen to work in Ghezen's cathedral, praying for the lost. It isn't so different from Kaz carving that headstone, alone in the snow. She hasn't asked him about that and doesn't intend to. It's done. There's no purpose in digging up the very thing she told him to bury.

"Creating a hypothetical cure. For firepox." Kaz appears to be studying a spot on the wall behind her.

Fate never needed her help. She should've known. Inej's hand stills against his chest, fingertips resting on his collarbones. "That's an interesting choice."

"He thinks it'll be impossible with his level of skill."

"Do you agree?"

Kaz takes hold of the rings on her necklace, pushing them back and forth with his thumb as he speaks. "He does, however, believe that with more expertise and perhaps a Fabrikator, it could be done."

Ah. A smile tugs at Inej's lips. "Another reason to celebrate Jordan's birthday at the manor."

"I never said anything of the sort."

She laughs softly. "Of course not, *me vrano.* " He never has to.

There is a pause, and then Kaz resumes toying with her rings. "I'm surprised you mentioned it."

Inej is immediately curious. He only takes this strange, sideways line of action when he's uncertain about approaching something and opts to circle it first, scouting for threats. "Why?"

"The weather will be better come spring. Strong winds for sailing." Kaz resumes studying the wall.

It's not as if she hasn't thought about it. The winter was an easy excuse to keep the fleet of Saints from the waves—that and their trip to the countryside—but Inej has been waiting for the restless itch to creep back into her bones, for the ground to start feeling too still again. In truth, she was expecting to feel caged on the Rietveld farm, but she'd found a strange affinity with the old house. Perhaps haunted things just have a kinship with each other.

And she's been considering his words— *every monstrous thing*— since the last time she left Ravka. Kaz knows legends and reputations. He made his into his armor. But silence is his armor, too, where Inej has made it her weapon, so why not wield and sharpen her mythos as

well? Perhaps the Ghost Ship only began with Inej Ghafa. Perhaps it can continue beyond her. “I want to be here for Jordan,” she says, slipping her hand into Kaz’s and toying with his wedding band as he does with hers. “I’m still going to take another voyage, just—later. But…”

She finds his gaze, once again fixed on her face. Sharp though Kaz’s features are, he’s at his most beautiful when painted in the morning’s soft, misty light, tousled, muzzy with sleep. Human. And, in those moments, entirely hers. “I already trust Sinyen to command the fleet if something were to happen to me.”

“All the better that it doesn’t,” says Kaz, and there’s a subtle fierceness in his voice. But she can’t fault him for being selfish when she is jealous, too. She thinks of his words from before, brushing rosewater through her hair: *Death is not your cutlass or your first mate. Death is the storms, the bullets.*

“If— *when*— I take another voyage, I’m considering using it to train Sinyen. To take over.” She gives Kaz’s hand a gentle squeeze, her lithe brown fingers flexing against his elegant ones. “Taking a leaf out of your book.”

Kaz’s laugh is dry enough that it’s barely more than a breath. “Ria is leading her first job tonight. I sent her with Anders and Simon to that Razorgull storehouse.”

Inej has heard this story in bits and pieces. A smuggled shipment went missing from Fifth Harbor, shortly followed by the Razorgulls throwing their weight around more than usual and generally overestimating their own skills. Kaz had been talking about putting a team together to find and raid the storehouse where the stolen shipment was being kept. “Why that team?” she asks. “Why that job?” As much as Kaz obfuscates his plans, she happens to know that some proud part of him enjoys explaining them to her. And she likes the low thrum of his voice fresh from sleep.

He rolls fully onto his back, jostling her head slightly. Inej shifts over to resume using him as a pillow, draping one arm across his middle. He gives an amused exhale. “I want them in and out without the Razorgulls being any wiser. Ria is a precision killer—sniping, pressure points. Simon is never tracked or seen unless he wants to be. And Anders’ ego needs shaving.”

“Hence Ria.” Inej smiles to herself. The Zemeni girl is pragmatic to the point of a fault and too independent to suffer fools. “Clever.”

Kaz rolls his head to the side to look at her, eyebrows raised in clear-cut skepticism. “What do you want, treasure?”

Knowing that she’s caught, Inej allows a glimmer of mischief into her smile. She should have known he’d never take the compliment at face value. She hooks her fingers under Kaz’s collar and draws them closer together, both their heads now resting on the same pillow. “Five more minutes.”

“Wallet, watch. A good thief never announces their target.”

Inej presses a kiss to his cheek and speaks close to his ear. “Ten minutes.”

“Which I assume is to misdirect me so that you can steal fifteen.”

“A good thief never reveals her secrets.”

Kaz takes a gentle hold of her chin. “May I?”

Even after all these years, he always asks. And Inej feels herself slip just a bit deeper in love with him each time he does. “Yes.”

Kaz has a different kiss to offer for each of his many facets, but this is her favorite, the one that reflects the softest light; it is proof that he is capable of gentleness, almost unbearably tender, reverent. It calls her *treasure* without ever speaking the word. And when she prays, Inej will count it as another small blessing.

Chapter End Notes

apologies for this chapter being a bit short; I blame the excess of dialogue. sometimes you have to forward the plot and you decide to do that via tooth-rotting fluff.

your comments always make my day <3 I literally wake up on fridays going OMG IT'S POSTING DAY!!!

Alby/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Jordan turns sixteen in good company.

Chapter Notes

WE DID IT!!!! WELCOME TO CHAPTER 100!!!

I almost never use multiple exclamation points, but this is the kind of occasion that demands it. thank you so much to all of you for supporting me up to now, and I hope you'll all stick it out to the end <3 my present to you is an extra-long chapter and, of course, your weekly shout-outs~

Heiress_Kyr, happy wife/happy life absolutely applies when your wife carries a collection of knives XD

FrenchLo_1995, the big party has arrived! I hope you enjoy <3

Typical_reader, posting day is here once again, and this one's special :D

Lunarmoo, romance is stored in the respected boundaries XD

fitzsavorycracker, I hope you wanted more fluff, because that is absolutely what you're getting :D

jzmn8r, I actually saw a kaz-as-elsa comic on pinterest one time. it was very silly and I liked it a lot lol

maiden_of_crows, you are doing the saints' work out there, spreading the good news about fanfic friday XD

thephonyqueenofengland, kanej using their soulmatism and pseudo-mind reading to trick and tease each other is so them oml

Rogues_of_Ketterdam, as much as I love angst, I also love bandaging it with fluff, hehe.

heyIamPearl, glad you're enjoying the dialogue! it really is fun to write.

Sarah, this is an insanely high compliment and I'm so honored <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alby knows enough to be aware that he spent some early part of his life in luxury; he broke enough toys as a child to know that he must have once had hundreds. He grew out of enough little velvet coats and shiny leather shoes to be aware that there was a time when he had a closet full. But the velvet gave way to cotton, and the toys were replaced with pencils and scrap paper before he really wanted them to be. All this is to say that he is standing on the front steps of the Van Eck mansion and trying very hard not to stare at anything.

Ketterdam in the spring is neither warmer nor more sunlit than in winter, just notably more damp, and dusk has already fallen to curtain the broad, merry walkway of the Geldstraat. Canals run behind the houses, reflecting yellow stains of lamplight like smeared paint, where the merchers are carried from their houses out into the city on private *gondels* with cushioned seats and little hidden cupboards. The windows of the Van Eck manor are full of rusty gold light, occasionally darkened by silhouettes; Alby thinks they must be talking, though he can't hear anything from outside. He lifts the heavy knocker on the door, made in the insignia of the Kerch flag, and lets it fall with a resounding *thud.*

Jordan had told him to look for the house with significantly fewer guards posted than the others, and indeed, Alby can only count three men in the Van Eck livery around the house. He gives them an uncertain wave and presumes that their lack of response means they've been told to admit him.

The door is flung open, and although Alby half-expects to see a maid or member of the house service, Jordan is there, that slender golden ring that he likes gleaming in the side of her nose.

He shifts his satchel back up onto his shoulder. "Happy bir—"

Jordan gives a delighted gasp and practically leaps into his arms; Alby finds that he has caught her and technically lifted her clear off her feet, although Jordan is mostly responsible for putting herself in this position.

"Hello to you too," he says.

"You came," she says delightedly. Alby clumsily sets her down on the porch, but Jordan has a cat's ability to land on her feet.

"What, you didn't think I could find it?"

She grins at him. "No. You're good at finding things. This is all just…a lot at once." She tilts her head toward the house. Upon a more thorough inspection, Alby notes that she's wearing some kind of blouse made of midnight blue silk with her climbing breeches.

"Not too much for me." He shrugs, stalling to try and summon the courage to go on, and still ends up rushing through it. "Not for you."

The occasions on which Jordan's smile grows shy are rare ones, and Alby pockets this particular memory. "Saints," she says, the smile still shining in her eyes. "I hope you're not planning to talk like that all night."

Alby tries to envision a world in which he would make any attempt to flirt with Jordan while her parents cut glares in his direction and comes up with nothing. “Definitely not planning it.”

“Good. Planning takes the fun out of everything.” Jordan loops her arm through Alby’s and all but drags him through the doorway, into a wide, lantern-lit foyer that echoes the design of the street outside. Further down, it seems to narrow into a bottleneck of sorts, a mahogany-paneled hallway with paintings on the walls. *No gawping,* Alby reminds himself. He tries to look at Jordan instead, but this results in a similar expression of dumbstruck amazement, so he stares at the floor and traces the seams between the planks of hardwood.

Jordan pulls him into one of the first rooms that branches from the foyer, a firelit sitting room with a grand staircase as its main fixture. There is a plush mauve rug on the landing and similarly-upholstered low couches clustered around the hearth. “Look who I found!” she crows.

The first person to look up at Alby is a man who appears younger than the others, though Alby knows he mustn’t be, his hair the same russet gold as the light in the windows. The kindness in his smile surprises Alby enough that it’s almost jarring. “Alby Rollins, I presume?”

The lanky Zemeni man seated beside him badly disguises a laugh with some sort of cough-sneeze hybrid.

Alby awkwardly rushes a few steps to go stand beside the couch and shake the man’s hand. Taking stock of the people in the room—Jordan, her parents, an older woman he doesn’t recognize, and these two—he realizes that this must be the Councilman in question. “Just Alby is fine,” he says, quickly adding, “Sir.”

The Zemeni man laughs again. Alby notes that the Councilman’s hand is resting on the Zemeni’s knee. “ *Sir* ,” he repeats. “Jordan, where did you find this one?”

“A country house in the middle of nowhere,” says Jordan. In his periphery, Alby catches her parents exchanging a significant look, though for what reason, he can’t imagine.

Alby digs around in the satchel at his side to find his notes. Withdrawing them, he starts, “Councilman—”

Another laugh. This time, the Councilman not-so-lightly elbows his partner. “I prefer first names too,” he says. He takes the notes from Alby’s extended hand and passes them over to the Zemeni man. “Wylan is fine.”

Alby nods slowly. “You’re sure?” What is it with every adult in Jordan’s life being so casual? He isn’t unfamiliar with the criminal world and finds it less surprising with her parents, but these aristocrats?

“I am,” the Councilman responds. He nods to the older woman, who is seated nearest to the fire, her graying hair swept into a loose knot. She gives Alby an elegant wave. “That’s my

mother, who has similar preferences and would rather you call her Marya. And this is Jesper, who could stand to learn from your manners."

His partner—Jesper—scoffs lightly. "I'm wonderfully charming."

Jordan's father speaks for the first time, an amused gleam in his dark eyes. "You're an acquired taste at best."

"Wy here has acquired me just fine," Jesper says smugly.

Alby shoots a slightly panicked look at Jordan, who is roughly mirroring his position, standing at the arm of the couch her parents are on. She just looks as if she's trying very hard not to laugh.

He is saved, however, by an aproned woman poking her head in from the foyer. "Dinner will be brought out shortly," she announces. Alby guesses that she must be from the Southern Colonies by her accent.

"Thank you," Marya says with a gracious nod. There's an odd dreaminess to her voice, and she moves as if she's underwater, but her eyes are as clear as her son's.

"Thanks, Miss Elise," Jordan says with a cheery wave. She receives a stern look in response, but Alby notes some lingering fondness. He isn't surprised; he can't imagine that there are many people in this city—or the world, for that matter—who have met Jordan and still manage to dislike her. Though, he's also not completely unaware of his own bias.

"You all go on," says Wylan—it's so strange to think of him that way—nodding towards the doorway. "I want to look over these." He glances over at the notes in Jesper's hand, but not long enough to take anything in. "We'll be there in a minute."

Alby automatically looks to Jordan, unsure of whether he should stay or follow. Unfortunately, no one else seems to share his hesitance; Dirtyhands almost immediately snaps up his walking stick and starts off towards what Alby assumes must be the dining room, and Jordan just shrugs before skipping a few steps to follow. Inej and Marya are somewhat slower to leave.

"He does that," Jesper says. He gives Alby a look of something like understanding. "You'll get used to it."

"I'd rather not have to," Alby sighs, but he traipses after Jordan and the others nonetheless.

He falls behind as they walk through the mahogany-paneled hall, having mostly given up on his no-gawping rule. At least Jordan slows down to keep pace with him as he sneaks furtive glances through the doorways of multiple parlors, most with fires burning in their hearths; one in particular is furnished in a whimsical style that must be imported, nothing like what he would've expected to find in a mercher's house. Frankly, the manor contains more color in general than Alby had thought he'd find.

They pass a pair of glass-paneled doors that reveal a garden, dim in the dusk. Jordan nudges Alby's side when she notices him looking. "You can see the canal from there," she says proudly.

"How…" Alby pulls his gaze away from the garden to look at her, slowing almost to a stop. "How did…any of this happen? I mean, your parents aren't your average canal rats, but…" *How did they end up so chummy with a pair of merchants in the richest part of the city? Aren't the merchers and the Barrel bosses usually against each other?* He doesn't know how to ask without sounding as if he's insulting Jordan's family; aside from the fact that he doesn't want her upset with him, he has a feeling that they'd hear him, even though they've disappeared into the dining room with Marya by now.

Jordan lifts one shoulder in an easy shrug, unbothered as usual. "They've been friends for a long time, since before they found me. I spent a lot of time here as a kid."

We're still kids, Alby thinks with a slight pang. But Jordan is so certain for her age of where she is and where she's going, and Alby is more lost than he should be. *There's supposed to be someone helping me,* he thinks. *Teaching me how to be.* He can't be the only one drawing the maps. But the compass his father gave him was rigged to falsely point home. Now Jordan is the only guiding star he knows.

He can't help hoping that this project will become something like a purpose. He's been aimless at school, and people give him a wide berth—it's like they think he carries a curse, the faceless boy with a dead best friend, dressed in gray like he's made of ashes. Get too close or breathe too strongly and he'll dissolve into the wind.

If only they knew. Alby still dreams sometimes that he's standing in that alleyway, the weight of the pistol pulling his hand down; sometimes he shoots, and then the Thorn turns into Koen, bleeding out in Alby's green jacket. He never says anything, either way. He just stares.

Jordan's hand slips into his. It's like she can sense him drifting away. "Just wait until you try the food here. They get the fish so fresh that they practically jump out of the harbor and onto the plate. They'll just put whole wheels of cheese on the table and you can cut them up. *And* they can bring in fruits and spices from the Southern Colonies. I'm not supposed to know what we're having tonight, but I bet I can guess."

Alby laughs, and it's not as forced as he thought it would be. "I'm sure you can. But save the surprise for me, will you?

"Fine, but only if you hurry." Jordan skips backward a few steps and drags him along with her. Alby lets himself be pulled. It's nice, not having to decide where he's going.

He has to concede that Jordan was right when they step into the dining room; the room is illuminated by candles mounted in brass fixtures on the walls and a wrought chandelier overhead that rains light on the dark, polished wood of the table, which is laden with platters and bowls. The centerpiece is a whole, glistening, crosshatched ham, carved on a gleaming tray laden with candied orange slices; it's bordered by a shallow wooden bowl of cracked walnuts glittering with salt on one side, and a lighter-grained bowl brimming with oranges, pears, and mangoes on the other. There is, as Jordan said, a whole, cream-colored wheel of

cheese with a slice cut out, and several small plates of salt herring with little silver forks stuck in them. At the far end of the table, another platter bears a pyramid of plush white rolls. On the near end, a brassy vase is slick with condensation, ice poking above its rim.

“Just wait until dessert,” Jordan says. The candlelight winks on the gold rings dangling from her ears. “Almond candies and cakes. I know that one because I asked.”

“You were supposed to let me be surprised,” Alby points out, taking a seat near the bowl of walnuts. The chairs are all intricately carved and built from the same near-black wood as the long table, their seats upholstered with plush, amber-striped cushions. Jordan flops into the chair beside his and scoops a handful of walnuts out of the bowl, clearly lacking any of Alby’s reservations.

Marya is at the very end of the table, serenely looking on. Alby looks down the table to where Jordan’s parents are sitting on the opposite side and catches sight of Brekker nicking a candied orange slice from the central platter, then receiving a stern look from his wife. Alby exchanges a look of shared suffering with her and cracks a surprised grin when she returns it.

The cook has reemerged with two tall, steaming porcelain cups, blue lace painted around the rims, and sets one in front of Jordan and one in front of her mother. “Green tea,” Jordan explains. She lets Alby try some, but he grimaces slightly at the herbal bitterness of it.

“Don’t you ever add sugar? Or milk?”

“That ruins its *purity,* ” Jordan insists, her eyes narrowing in the way that generally indicates a plan to die on this particular hill.

This is barely a hill. This is a slight rise in the land. An ant mound, maybe. But Alby can’t help grinning to himself, because this is Jordan, and he has to admire how easy it is for her to find things to dedicate herself to. “Since when do you care about purity?”

She smirks at him, and Alby realizes with a jolt that he misinterpreted her previous look. That was not the look of Jordan building a fortress. That was the look of Jordan setting a trap. He coughs and opts to notice an interesting spot on the table, risking a glance at Jordan’s parents. They appear to not be paying attention, but Alby isn’t sure how much he should bank on that.

He is rescued by the entrance of the house’s owners, who forgo the places at the head of the table that Alby is expecting them to take and sit beside Jordan’s parents instead, almost directly across from Alby and Jordan.

Wylan hands the notes back to him. “You’ve got a good start, there,” he says. “I’m interested in how you decided on some of the materials, though.”

“What’s this for?” Marya asks, peering curiously at the notes.

“We found someone for Wy to talk science with,” Jesper explains, flashing a white-toothed grin.

Alby tucks the papers back into his satchel beside Jordan's present. Looking back up, he says, "Mostly based on the reactions they have to each other. It's been long enough since the plague outbreak that we're finally having some real progress in research, but the problem has been trying to attack it with the effects of individual components instead of…" He pauses, acutely aware of the length of time for which he's been hearing his own voice. "Sorry. There was probably a shorter answer to that."

"Shorter isn't always better," Wylan says as a different maid from before, a wispy, mousy-haired girl, comes by to set glasses beside each occupied plate.

"Don't I know it," Jesper says with a wicked smirk.

Alby drops his head into his hands in vague horror while Jordan groans loudly and an excess of cackling erupts. *Ghezen's sake. These people are prominent figures in our government. They are my girlfriend's family. What is happening.*

"Let's just pretend that didn't happen," Jordan says, turning to face Alby directly, her chin propped in her hand. "You should be smart more often, you know."

Alby uncovers his face but keeps looking down at his plate, not sure whether he should admit the smile that's fighting to break onto his face.

Jesper raises his glass to Jordan. "Smart, easily flustered redheads with questionable fathers, am I right?"

" *Jesper,"* Wylan and Inej say at the same time, but Jordan clinks glasses with him anyway. Alby seriously contemplates hiding under his chair.

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Kaz has never been described as *talkative,* but he's particularly quiet through dinner, opting to observe. Despite the fact that he likes to avoid wasting his time on regrets, he'd like to decide whether or not this choice was a good one before he loses the chance to reverse it.

He may have lost the chance already, however; as he'd suspected, despite their collective history with Pekka Rollins, the manor's residents are quickly endeared to the kid, particularly when they discover how easy it is to tease him and Jordan.

He isn't sure how he's going to explain this one away without unraveling everything. Despite surviving this long on the solid philosophy of *never something for nothing,* the only reason he can give for finding Alby Rollins help and a potential place to stay is that it could result in firepox being eradicated, which just looks like more philanthropy unless he reveals his own history. He scowls, which luckily doesn't draw much attention because it's practically his resting expression.

By the time dessert is served, the conversation has returned to Alby's research. Jesper reaches one long arm across the fruit bowl to pluck a sticky-sweet almond candy off of the tray as soon as it's set down. "So you think the reactions will kill these little things that cause the sickness. Right?"

Alby Rollins nods, his expression set. Kaz has noticed a tendency in the kid to be overly serious, but if he faulted that he'd be adding hypocrisy to his list of sins. "They would if I could combine the materials in the right way. But they don't naturally mix. That's why I was thinking it would take a Grisha to do it."

Jesper and Wylan exchange a look. Marya appears oblivious. Kaz hasn't expressly told Alby about Jesper—frankly, he's told the kid next to nothing about this potential arrangement, more out of habit than anything—but he'll be surprised if it doesn't get revealed by the end of the night.

Inej leans closer to him and whispers, "Five *kruge* if Jesper tells him before Jordan opens her presents."

The corner of Kaz's mouth lifts into a smirk as he snags one of the almond cakes flecked with cherry blossoms. The candies look interesting, but he's kept his gloves on due to current company and has no interest in getting them sticky with syrup. "I'll take that bet. He'll hold out until we start on drinks." Kaz provided a supply of the cherry wine from the Crow Club, small enough for their party. Whether Jesper had a weakness for the drink itself or the environment in which it was served remains unclear, but it was a major contributor in some of the best stories from Jesper's time in the Dregs.

"It's low-risk," Inej muses, "given the joint account."

"Financial benefits," Kaz murmurs, and she gives a soft laugh. He allows himself a shred of gratefulness that they can joke about that now. Even if he had been in the practice of hoping, he never would have hoped this much at the time, losing everything a second time in the same house. But it became another thing he has reclaimed, another broken place crafted into a strength; now, the place that once housed the illusion of a family contains the real thing. And Kaz has developed an excellent eye for telling the counterfeit from the authentic product. He intended to never be tricked again.

By the time dessert winds down, Kaz has burned his way through three of the almond pastries under Inej's vaguely disapproving gaze. "You have better things to judge me for, Inej," he says with a sideways look at her, and he can see a smile tugging at her lips. Her face is rimmed in warm candlelight, haloed by loose wisps of hair from her braid. It's been a long time since she has worn it as tight and sleek as she used to. Kaz lets himself be transfixed while the rest of the room is distracted; he doesn't think he'll ever grow tired of this, drinking her in like a survivor discovering a clean stream.

"I'll spare you this one," she says. "Only because you're allowing yourself comfort."

"Don't be ridiculous," he responds, but he sounds more crotchety than truly irritated. She seems to have that effect.

His attention is redirected by Jordan tapping her hands on the table. "With all the niceness in my heart, which is not exactly a renewable resource, can we *please* do presents now?"

"Jordan," Inej says. She never needs to raise her voice; her eyes pin their little crow like a dagger.

“What?” Jordan is evidently trying not to sound like she’s complaining, but it isn’t going very well. Evidently changing tack, she looks to Kaz. “I said please! Da?”

“She did say please,” Kaz observes. They both know she only calls him that when she wants something, but is it really his fault that it’s working?

“Trouble in paradise,” Jesper half-sings. Off Inej’s sharp look, he continues, “That was actually very polite, when you take into account who raised her. No offense, Inej.”

“Some taken,” Inej replies.

Marya gives a surprisingly bright laugh.

Jordan makes her eyes wide and pleading, which mostly just looks ridiculous. “... *Please?* ”

Alby Rollins, brave soul that he is, appears to have decided to keep his mouth shut. Strategically, Kaz admits, it’s the best move; while Alby doesn’t want to upset Jordan and Kaz himself is the least fond of the kid, Inej is likely the worst choice to make an enemy of, despite her retention of her morals.

Luckily for everyone involved, the Sankta of the Sea chooses mercy. “You’re not in very good company for learning manners,” she concedes.

“I’m very proper,” Jesper interjects.

Wylan does up the several open buttons leading to Jesper’s collar and smoothes it down. “Now you are.”

“Never mind. Being proper doesn’t allow much room for breathing.”

“Not at all,” Marya agrees, looking fondly over at the pair. Kaz finds himself almost irritated by the fact that he continues to be surprised by her flashes of clarity; he’s supposed to be the one who anticipates everything. But he has avoided paying too much attention to Marya because she has a habit of trying to dote on him.

“You need a better tailor,” says Kaz, who mastered the art of dressing like a mercher at fourteen and subsequently had to account for two separate growth spurts.

Jordan slides her chair back. “Okay. I will be waiting in the parlor, very patiently, and maybe even with good posture.” She takes Alby by the arm. “And Alby has so nicely volunteered to come with me.”

“Of course,” says Alby, grabbing his satchel as he doesn’t follow so much as he is pulled along behind her. As bewildered as he looks, at least he knows his lines.

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Kaz takes his customary seat in the high-backed chair by the fireplace, propping his bad leg up on the footstool that Jesper and Wylan didn’t *say* they’d acquired for him but only got after this became the chair he habitually claimed. He leans his cane against his lap and sips

slowly on the cherry wine in his glass. He's fairly certain that he saw Jordan sneaking some, but given that no one in this room except perhaps Alby was dedicated to sobriety at sixteen, he doesn't bother with stopping her.

Inej sits on the floor beside his chair, her elbow propped on his good knee. She seems to be in one of the moods where she develops a moral objection to furniture. Frankly, it's one Kaz might share if sitting on the floor was a less painful procedure.

"As Jordan's favorite pseudo-uncle, I should get to go first," says Jesper. He is holding a box wrapped in paper with a repeating pattern of fruit.

"I don't think you can claim that title without asking her first," Wylan muses.

"Ladies, ladies, there's enough of me to go around," Jordan says. She is taking up the center of the wood-framed couch, with Alby sitting a few inches away from her as if he's unsure about moving any closer.

"Go on, or we'll never get through this," Kaz says.

"I see how it is. You want my birthday to hurry up and be over with." Jordan crosses her arms with an excess of drama and looks over to Alby. "Can you believe that?"

"No comment," says Alby.

Patience has never been one of Jesper's greatest virtues, and he crosses the room with long strides to press the parcel into Jordan's hands. "You heard the man. Go on."

Finish the story, Kaz thinks.

Jordan tears into the paper without trying to preserve it and pulls the lid off of the box, withdrawing a strange object shaped like a metal starburst. "Shiny," she comments.

"It's a puzzle," says Jesper, who looks like a proud bird, complete with tropical coloring. "It'll be a set of throwing stars once you figure out how to take it apart."

Jordan beams.

"Don't start on it now," Inej advises. "Or you won't do anything else until you've solved it."

"Now," says Wylan, "I wonder where she learned that?"

Kaz shoots Wylan a weaker version of his usual glare. The merchling, who has experienced the full force of the real thing, is entirely unbothered.

"My turn," Wylan says. He passes her a long, flat box with a mauve velvet ribbon tied neatly at the top.

"It's from both of us," Marya puts in, her voice soft and melodic as she looks on from her seat furthest from the fire.

Jordan lifts this lid with slightly more care and sets it aside, revealing a thick glass inkwell with a cork stopper and a set of brushes and pens. The handles are ebony wood, polished to a shine and engraved with feathers, the brushes are plush and pointed, and the silver pen nibs are piercingly reflective in the firelight.

“Since you’re about to be a student,” Wylan explains. Kaz finds it ironic that he chose to give Jordan a set of writing tools, but then again, Kaz himself is the one who gave her Jordie’s watch.

“Thank you!” Jordan says, grinning at both of them. “Once I fix my handwriting, I’ll have better notes than anyone.”

“Your handwriting is beyond repair,” Alby mutters, smirking slightly.

Didn’t take him long to get comfortable.

“I hope you got me something to make up for that,” Jordan says, giving him a *look.*

“Funny story, I did, actually.” Alby withdraws a small, narrow box wrapped in plain paper from the satchel at his side and passes it over to her. At least the kid knows how to recover smoothly. Kaz is almost amused at himself, evaluating this relationship as if he really knows how they’re meant to work.

Jordan tears a seam in the paper and lifts the lid from the box, withdrawing a long, brassy chain. Off a quick assessment, it’s certainly not expensive, but it is well-made. It looks like a pocketwatch chain, the kind Kaz always hated because it clipped to the watch in a way that was difficult to undo without the pigeon noticing.

“It’s a watch chain,” Alby explains hurriedly. “For the one you always carry around. So you don’t lose it. I also just thought it looked cool.”

“I would never lose it,” Jordan says, but she slides over and rests her head on Alby’s shoulder regardless.

While she withdraws Jordie’s watch from her pocket and the two of them set about attaching the chain, Jesper, who knows its history by now, catches Kaz’s eye. “What are the odds?” he says quietly—well, quiet for Jesper.

“Not winning ones,” Kaz responds. He’s tempted to shake his head. He can already predict the speech Inej is going to make to him about fate and orchestration. If he’s being orchestrated by anything, it’s the force of irony.

Jordan now has the chain attached and is admiring the watch, swinging it back and forth like the hypnotists do on East Stave, so Inej rises like an upswept breeze and passes her a parcel wrapped in dark, checked paper. “This is from both of us.”

Jordan inspects the shape of the box. “A new knife?” she says hopefully.

“You have plenty,” Inej responds, which is a bit hypocritical of the pious Wraith in Kaz’s opinion, but that will be a conversation to have later. “Open it and see.”

Once again, Jordan shows very little regard for the integrity of the wrapping paper. She's still leaning against Alby's shoulder, and the kid hasn't quite lost his panicked expression—though, honestly, if Kaz was going to dismember him he'd have done it by now. She pulls the crumpled brown paper from the box and lifts up a pair of golden, bell-shaped earrings, Suli-made. Kaz happens to know because this particular gift was his idea.

"They're lovely," Marya murmurs.

"And real?" Jordan asks, looking to Inej as if she almost doesn't believe it.

"I would never put you in anything false," Inej says, still standing, regal in the firelight, and something steely flashes in her eyes. Kaz suspects he knows why.

Once Jordan has made her way through the box, she's uncovered a set of armbands and several smaller gold earrings as well. She holds them with a rare kind of carefulness, as if afraid they might break.

"We want you to have pieces of where you came from, *meja* ," Inej explains, settling back beside Kaz's chair. "Home for us is family. It can be many places."

Marya gives a fond hum.

"Thank you," says Jordan, her voice smaller than it has been all night. There's a suspicious shine in her eyes, but no one comments.

Kaz meets her gaze, just long enough for her to understand all that he doesn't want to say in front of so many people. "Happy birthday, Jordan," he says roughly.

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As the evening unwinds, the fire dilutes in the hearth, drawing those still gathered into its smaller pool of light; Marya retires to bed, and Jesper and Wylan migrate to stand by Alby and discuss his project. Wylan's memory stands to rival his own, Kaz thinks—he assumes Jesper read the notes to him once before dinner, and he's still discussing them in perfect detail.

Inej slipped away to the kitchen a few moments ago to brew herself a cup of tea, and b ased on the snatches of conversation Kaz is picking up, she's going to owe him five *kruge* when she returns. In the meantime, Jordan wanders over to take her spot on the floor beside him.

"The jewelry was your idea, wasn't it?" she asks.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," says Kaz, though a slight smile hooks the corner of his mouth.

"The secret's out. I already know you're a sentimental sap."

Kaz watches the flames for a moment, deep red at their base, occasionally sending up halfhearted sparks. He doesn't necessarily like the idea that he, like the fire, has mellowed

over time, but it's true that the plan he's considering now would have been insanity to him just a few years ago.

"And I know that you insisted you wanted red hair as a child and invented a competitive sock-puppet fighting ring, so weigh your options," he says. But maybe he's proving her point by reminiscing.

"You wouldn't tell," Jordan protests.

"I built my business on blackmail, Jordan."

She gives an irritated huff but doesn't immediately retort. The fire crackles lazily.

"Is it a good day?" Jordan asks.

Kaz looks over to the wood-framed couch, where the people he might dare to call friends are chatting amiably with Pekka Rollins' son, scheming over a cure for firepox. His gaze drifts to the girl at his side, who bears his brother's name and carries his watch in her pocket, but has become entirely, remarkably her own. He slips off his gloves and slides them into his coat pocket, and his wedding band winks in the firelight; he has a home to return to tonight, with a gently glowing hearth just like this, and he'll actually sleep, then wake under the sun's gentle watch with Inej as the first sight his eyes find. He allows himself the comfort of little almond cakes and has lived to see it all.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, it is."

Jordan slides closer and rests her head on his knee, tentatively at first before she settles, watching the flames shift and shiver. Kaz smoothes a hand over her hair. After a moment, she says, "Da."

"Yes?"

"Nothing," she replies. "Just saying hi."

The first time she called him that name, he'd been sitting in this very chair. She'd been so small then. Small enough to hold. Small enough to break. But the destroyer fought his way to gentleness that day, and they're both still here.

Kaz calls out to the voice that has been silent since that snowy day beneath the linden trees. *Look, Jordie,* he says, *I'm living.*

The answer is silence, and it almost sounds like peace.

Chapter End Notes

I ended up making up for the last few short chapters with this behemoth. I think it's the longest one so far TT

(for some behind-the-scenes, I wrote most of this in a 3-ish hour writing spree that included lots of poking around on the wiki and reddit to find foods from the grishaverse, plus several dives into my notes about the insane and unplanned layout I made up for the van eck house like...two years ago. and honestly that's so me coded that I wouldn't want ch 100 to be written any other way)

also also, this seems like a good place to plug my socials again, so: I am @fairytales_of_forever on insta and @fairytalesofforever on tumblr if you'd like to come chat with me there! I've also written a handful of shorter SoC fics, mostly kanej, if you simply can't wait till next friday XD

Alby/Inej

Chapter Summary

Alby gets a place to stay. Inej starts a new voyage.

Chapter Notes

thank you to everyone for all the congratulations on the last chapter <3 I am back with a bit of a transition into the exciting things to come, and of course, your shout-outs~

bloodofkingsonmytrousers, I've been having a great time watching your reread :D

maiden_of_crows, I apologize for the tears (but only a little)

cameliawrites, I'm glad that scene left the impression that I was aiming for <3

jzmn8r, "silly scrunkly x pookie pie princess" is my new favorite ship dynamic

Typical_reader, I'm hoping to see a bit more of Marya in the coming chapters :)

Lunarmoo, it was nice to slip in some nods to Jordan and Inej's heritage here :)

thephonyqueenofengland, the found family is FOUND FAMILYING

fruitysaladx, and the chapter loves you (as do I) <3

Heiress_Kyr, we're working on getting alby a bit more found <3

Anonymous_star, you're in luck—more has arrived!

always_reading2027, I figured that you guys deserved some fluff as a celebration <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next time Alby finds himself at the Van Eck manor, he's holding a sturdy and very full case, his satchel slung over the opposite shoulder.

He hopes his first impression wasn't *too* good, strange though it sounds. His mind still feels somewhat liquefied after final exams, and he's not at all sure that it will be up to whatever task his research partners set for him. He isn't really sure what else to call them, seeing as

Wylan has actively discouraged Alby from using his title, but “research partners” puts them on more equal footing than Alby feels he should.

At Jordan’s party, after wrapping paper had been discarded and Marya retired to bed, they’d taken him aside. It started with the pretense of more questions about his notes, but it wasn’t hard to clock Jesper as a bad liar.

His eyes had been moving too fast, jumping and darting around the room, and the questions were getting repetitive. Eventually, Wylan took the notes from his partner’s hands.

“We may have heard that you’re planning to stay in the city this summer,” he said, meeting Alby’s eyes.

Alby frowned. Of course Jordan’s da had told them. Or maybe Jordan had. He’d like to think that she would know what to keep in confidence, but sometimes Jordan could take executive decisions too far when she thought she was helping. “I think so,” he said cautiously.

The pair of them exchanged a look. Alby found himself wishing that Jordan was there beside him rather than off talking to her da; he wished he had someone to look at in that way, to exchange meaning without saying a word. Someone who just *knew.* He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was lost on his own, a compass whirling out of control.

“Well, first of all, this looks like a very good start,” said Wylan, tapping the papers against the arm of the couch.

“Since you’ve been spending too much time around Kaz and his allergy to compliments,” Jesper added.

At that, Alby cracked a smile. “And second of all?” he asked.

“Well, we should really fix that,” Jesper said, fingers tapping against the side of his mostly-empty glass. “Can’t be good for your self-esteem.”

“We do have a guest room,” Wylan said.

“Several,” Jesper added.

Alby had expected many things from this pair, especially given their status. He’d thought they would be upright, strict, maybe even prudish. But there was an air of mischief around them that he hadn’t been counting on, one that made their association with Jordan and her criminal parents much less mystifying. He paused to be sure he understood what they were implying. “You mean…?”

“Unless you’d rather pay for a boardinghouse,” Wylan said, inclining his head in a nod. “And if you do, it won’t change anything about the project, except the distance you have to travel to work on it.” There was a slight glitter in his blue eyes that couldn’t be entirely blamed on the firelight—almost a smile, maybe even the beginnings of a laugh.

“We’ll have to hide you in a trunk or something during the *really* nice dinners,” Jesper said, flashing a white-toothed grin. “Or maybe the old safe.”

“I don’t think that safe is still intact.”

“Please don’t put me in a box,” Alby said weakly.

After that, they’d laughed and assured him that the offer still stood. He left them without a certain answer that night, but eventually settled his mind—as much as it could be settled, anyway. Now here he is, shifting his weight from foot to foot and eyeing the door as if it might spring open and devour him.

This time, it *is* a maid who opens the door and gives Alby a once-over. “You’re to come along with me, sir,” she says; she reaches to take his case, Alby instinctively grasps it tighter, and they have a very brief tug-of-war before he feels ridiculous and lets it go. He wanders into the foyer after her, still bemused that she called him *sir.* Does he look like a *sir?* He has a man’s build by now, and he’s grown taller than his father, but he still feels as if he has the face of a child.

He trails after the maid into the first parlor and up the grand staircase. She looks to be in her thirties, with a soft build and a thick knot of straw-blonde hair, and she seems to get slightly winded as they ascend to the third floor, so Alby slows down.

“I can carry my—”

“But I’m afraid you won’t. All of these proud, stubborn men they invite over…” This last bit is muttered under her breath, but Alby still catches it and almost smiles to himself.

I’d wager that Jordan is prouder and more stubborn than the rest of us put together.

The staircase leads to a large, open central room with gleaming, dark wood floors. Hallways unfurl from either side of it; the maid leads Alby down the one on the left and opens the first door they come to.

He reaches for the handle and is met with a stern look.

Ghezen. Not even my tutors were this strict.

The maid opens the door and lays his case flat on the bed, which is a canopied four-poster with a deep purple duvet and an excess of pillows. Alby wanders into the room, fists clutched around the strap of his satchel, and takes careful stock of it. Most of the floor is covered in a large, ornate cream rug with patterns wrought in violet and dark-wine tones. There are heavy wood nightstands on either side of the bed and a matching wardrobe against the opposite wall, beside a door. The window on the wall that he’s facing overlooks the garden and the Geldcanal.

Alby thinks of his room at the University—narrow beds, plain furniture, Koen’s plants cramped onto a shelf. The green quilt over his bed. The quilt he left behind.

No green today? Jordan had asked him.

No , he said. *Not for a while,* he didn’t say. *Maybe never again.* But he can’t get rid of the eyes he meets in the mirror, green as one of his father’s garish waistcoats.

He wonders if they'll ever get the stain out of the floor.

"They'll be back from the shipping offices soon," says the maid, smoothing out the already-unwrinkled comforter. "In the meantime, I'm to tell you to make yourself comfortable."

Alby untwists his hands from his satchel. "Thank you." He glances over at her. "What's your name?"

"Beatrix," she says with a rosy smile. "But Bea is also fine. Or, 'you over there', so long as you're looking at me."

Alby feels some of the tension evaporate from his shoulders. "Right then," he says. He crosses to the bed and unlatches his case, but doesn't open it, resting his hands on the lid. "Bea it is."

She gives a little bow and slips out the door. Alby forces himself to open the case and start unpacking his few things, hanging clothes in the wardrobe and carefully unwrapping bottles and glass components from the brown paper he packed them in. He brought enough with him for a semester, but he'll have to make do with it unless he wants to go home. *Or get a job.* He has the allowance his father gave him to use for the year, and so far he's been just desperate enough to get over any moral qualms about spending it, but it'll run out soon—even if he *is* making it stretch by putting his room and meals on a Councilman's tab.

He sits on the end of the bed and flops backwards onto the plush mattress. It's so much softer than the ones in the dormitory. He feels like he's sinking.

Alby wants to shut his eyes, but he tells himself to keep staring at the canopy, to internalize where he is. He's going to have to face it sooner or later.

But, Ghezen, he misses Koen. It hurts like his ribs are being crushed. It's not just the absence of his best friend, of Koen monologuing about historical battles to his plants or his asthmatic huffing after all those flights of stairs. It's the plain, bald loneliness of it all. He even misses Jort. At least the nervous Fjerdan was freed from Pekka's employ after Alby was deemed to have properly adjusted.

He knows he can't rely on Jordan forever, but he wishes she were here, too. She'd have something to say, something wise or at least funny enough that he'd stop feeling sorry for himself. But Alby has spent enough time leaning on other people—on his father, on Jordan—and if he's ever going to know who he is and where he's going, if he's going to make *Alby* mean more than *Rollins* , he has to do it alone.

He pushes himself up to sit, feeling much heavier than usual. Or maybe just weaker.

First step in self-actualization: unpack , Alby thinks, turning back to his case.

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Inej stands beside Sinyen as Ketterdam's harbor slips further and further away. Soon the city will be a gray blot on the horizon.

“Jordan didn’t want to come?” Sinyen questions.

Inej sends up a silent prayer of thanks for her first mate; Sinyen knew to wait, to speak only of preparing the ship and practical matters until the fleet of Saints had made it out onto the waves. “Not this time. She has more tying her to land these days.”

Inej wonders if Alby Rollins knows Jordan’s favorite flower, her favorite sweet, her favorite song. She wonders if he would choose Jordan’s freedom—if he would know, should the day come, when it was best to let her go.

“Who’s going to stitch me up next time I get used as a pincushion, then?” San comments as she jogs past to address some issue with the ropes.

“Our actual medik will have to do,” Inej calls back drily.

The waves whisper against the sides of the ship as she cuts through the True Sea. Sinyen gives a soft, humming laugh. “You have your anchors too, don’t you, Captain?”

Inej exhales, the sound almost silenced by the waves. The trouble with sailing and fighting and bleeding alongside someone, weeping in one another’s arms, passing a bottle back and forth and singing round after round of toneless shanties, is that they learn to read you like a map.

She said her goodbyes to Kaz and Jordan at the house—brief whispers in the morning’s dark, rushed but tight embraces—but she wishes she could’ve made them longer.

Death is not your cutlass or your first mate. Death is the storms, the bullets.

She knows what she once said she wanted: *To die on my feet, with a knife in my hand.* But those were the days when the choices were to be a prisoner or a survivor. Now she has a chance at peace, the promise of something else waiting.

Inej watches the sea disappear beneath the *Sankt Petyr’* s hull. “This is one of the conversations where you can call me Inej.”

“But you’re about to speak to me as my captain, aren’t you?” Sinyen’s golden eyes pierce hers in the pale, early light.

Inej nods once. “You know what I’ve been intending.”

Sinyen stands a bit straighter, facing her fully. “I do.”

“I don’t have much left to teach you, Sinyen. If a wave takes me overboard or I meet the end of a slaver’s weapon, I trust that the Ghost Ship will continue its mission. Even now.” Inej touches the brim of her captain’s hat, the gift from Kaz and Jordan. “But you’ll have to get your own hat.”

Sinyen salutes, as if they’re proper navy soldiers and not pirates on a phantom warship. “Aye aye, captain.”

Inej returns her salute. Sinyen retreats to gather the crew. The True Sea rushes on beneath them.

The *Sankt Petyr* cuts through the waves—a knife, thrown; an arrow, flying.

Chapter End Notes

I exhausted all of my writing energy last week, so you get another short chapter lol. also, happy new year!! here's to more kanej in 2024 <3

Jordan/Alby

Chapter Summary

Jordan attends her first class. Alby has a breakthrough.

Chapter Notes

I am....so sorry.

Somehow I've managed to update this fic through several life crises, and yet a stream of sheer busyness has taken me out of the game. Oops. Well, I've been trying to pull together an update for weeks, and I'm pleased to say that I'm *finally* back in business and ready to get into an arc I've been planning for a long time.

Speaking of a long time, let's get into your well overdue shout-outs~

thestarsinoureyes, I do apologize to whoever you're sharing an office with for the squealing, but...only kind of.

maiden_of_crows, I love your point that the "easy heart" that was such a distant dream for Kaz and Inej is now within the realm of possibility.

Lunarmoo, kanej absolutely have high standards for their daughter, but I believe in Alby's ability to meet them.

Pipperdoo, this made me make a sound that's reminiscent of a deflating balloon.

Heiress_Kyr, Alby would not be having a good time with St. Patty's Day coming up, lol.

jzmn8r, I, too, both pity the characters and cheer them on, lol.

the_elusive_poteto, I'm so glad that my tumblr marketing (???) strategy is working, lol.

Typical_reader, I completely understand because I am also incredibly proud of them all <3

Sarah, Kanej is sailing both literally and figuratively (or at least inej is, lol)

fitzsavorycracker, good for them indeed!

always_reading2027, that hat is very very important XD

shieldmaiden19, Alby was probably adopted before they even met him, lol.

mxclarke, I envy your reading stamina and I'm glad you're enjoying the fic!

LittleDinosaur02, all the hearts <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At least the University of Ketterdam is aware enough of its circumstances that it allows its students to be lightly armed. Jordan is almost sure she'd feel entirely exposed if she wasn't carrying a knife or three, like one of those dreams where you look down and realize you're not wearing pants.

Fortunately, she is wearing pants (as well as three respectable knives) when she walks into the lecture hall, a broad theater of a room whose wooden benches look like the pews in the Church of Ghezen (except for the initials and rude drawings scratched into their arms). The room is only about half-full so far; Jordan congratulates herself on being exceptionally early before pausing beside the door to case the room like a target.

Tall windows, she notes. *Fancy glass but probably breakable. The iron frames might be tricky to wiggle through.* The ceiling is highly domed but otherwise unremarkable, and lanterns glow by each set of doors, one on either side of the massive blackboard, which Jordan is currently standing a few feet away from. The seats slope up, which would make escaping from the back rows significantly more difficult, so Jordan opts not to sit back there. Instead, she slides into the second row, ending up beside a dusty-haired boy in a style of peacoat that Jordan has seen hundreds of times on the streets of this city.

His face looks familiar, she considers, but even as she combs through her memory she can't tie it to anything.

He rummages around in his floppy knapsack for a moment before withdrawing a sheaf of notepaper like the one Alby is always scribbling on, then drops it unceremoniously onto the table in front of him and scrawls something at the top. His hand comes away with a smudge of ink on the side and he swears under his breath.

Jordan keeps her face turned forward but shifts her eyes subtly to glance at what he's written. It's a name: *Lewies Aarden* .

"Lewies?" she asks.

His head snaps up, and the blank look in his eyes blinks away. "I know you."

Jordan nods once, regarding him with what she thinks is a healthy amount of suspicion. "Yes. My name's Jordan. I guess it would've been Jordan Ghafa when you knew me, although it's Jordan Rietveld now."

Alarm flashes across Lewies's face. "You got married?"

“Saints’ sake.” Jordan stares at him. “ *No.* My mama got married. You know, the one you called a nobody?”

At least Lewies is smart enough to grimace. He’s skinnier, Jordan thinks, like he got stretched out sometime between when they were kids and now. “Did I really say that?”

Jordan nods gravely. She has practically forgotten about the whole thing, if she’s being honest, but making him squirm is much more fun than being honest. Maybe, if he feels bad enough, she can save it up as a debt to call in. It is useful to have people owe her, after all. “You did,” she says, trying to look very hurt and serious. She isn’t as much of an actor as her da, but she tries.

“I did,” Lewies says slowly, blinking. His brow furrows. “And then you hit me.”

Jordan abruptly switches her acting choice from hurt to amnesia. “I would never do such a thing.” She adds some blinking to solidify the effect.

Lewies seems supremely unmoved. “You kicked dirt on me too.”

“Well, if I ever *did* do that, you deserved it,” Jordan says with a contented shrug, reaching down to pull the books and papers from her own bag where it sits by her feet.

When she pops back up, Lewies appears to have gone back to his paper, but after a moment he gives her a sideways glance. Jordan smiles sunnily.

“Look, I’m sorry I said those things,” he says. “I really don’t know what I was thinking. But maybe if your mother teaches you to hit people—”

“Quit while you’re ahead,” Jordan advises in a sing-song voice, flicking her braid over to rest on her shoulder.

There is a huff from her neighbor, but otherwise he’s quiet. Jordan is okay with this.

The rest of the students shuffle in through the two sets of doors, chatting quietly or just observing the room with a measure of suspicion. Jordan watches the ones that look interesting. She’d honestly been expecting to see a greater variety of people here, given how Ketterdam always seems to be swirling with currents of people from all over the world, but maybe most of them can’t afford the costs of the university. Most of the students here look Kerch, some maybe Kaelish, some Zemeni. She doesn’t see many Shu, but that’s not exactly a surprise given that they probably prefer their own schools.

One of the sets of doors swings open and the instructor walks in—she’s much younger than Jordan was expecting, and better yet, a woman. Jordan sits up straighter in her seat.

The instructor sets her pile of books down on the large wooden desk up front with a definitive *thud* and scans the room with a piercing gaze. She reaches back and pulls a pencil from her coil of hair, sending it spilling down her back in a great length of auburn.

“I hope you have something to write with,” she says, sticking the pencil between her teeth so that her hand is free to start scrawling some kind of diagram on the board in chalk. She looks

back over her shoulder at the rows of students. “And that none of you are squeamish.”

Jordan grins. The smile only grows when she notices Lewies squirming beside her.

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Alby scrambles up the steps of the Van Eck manor, his coat halfway off, grasping at his stack of loose papers to keep them from flying away. He haphazardly flings the knocker upwards and watches it fall, panting, taking the moment to shove his scarf away from his mouth, where the fringe keeps sticking.

Bea opens the door. “Ghezen’s sake, boy, whatever’s happened to you?”

“Nothing bad,” Alby promises. “It’s good, actually.” He cranes his neck to the side to try to see over her shoulder. “Is Jordan here? She said she’d come by after classes.”

Bea shakes her head at him in a way that, counterintuitively, means *yes*. “Go see for yourself.” She steps to the side, and Alby wastes no time in speed-walking through the foyer to the sitting room at the base of the main staircase, where Jordan is indeed perched in a high-backed chair, smiling like a cat that has spent the afternoon feasting on sparrows. Or pigeons.

He rushes over to her and falls to his knees in front of the chair, grabbing her hands, giddy and ungraceful. “It worked,” he blurts out.

She blinks and a smile breaks over her face, so brilliant it’s almost blinding. She drops out of the chair and now they’re both kneeling, clutching at each other, as Alby nods rapidly.

“Really?” Jordan says. She flings her arms around him and buries her face in his shoulder. Alby holds her as tight as he can.

“Really,” he says. “I finally got usable results. And at least in the test…it worked.” A cure is a difficult thing to test, especially in a makeshift laboratory that is halfway the office of a mercher’s house, filled with equipment mostly smuggled there from the university. Alby isn’t anywhere near Jordan’s skill as a thief, but she has taught him enough to get what he needed when no one was watching. He’d thought the initial theory would be the most difficult part, but finding which experiments to run had turned out to be a series of slow-going trials, and this was the first triumph they’d seen in months.

Jordan takes his face in her hands and kisses him hard, with enough energy that the pair of them almost tip over backwards onto the rug. As it is, Alby has to put a hand down behind him to steady himself, and he comes away from the kiss laughing.

“I told you I didn’t know why you were so worried,” says Jordan, her arms still loosely draped over his shoulders. She flashes him a grin. “Just wait until I get to give my patients a bottle with your name on it.”

Alby manages a smile, but it’s small and embarrassed and directed down at his lap. Jordan’s enthusiasm is nothing new, but the force of her praise is like full sun and he can’t seem to

look directly at it. And it's not just that—does he want the name *Rollins* pinned to all of his achievements? The name of the man who had Koen killed? Whose letters Alby hasn't opened in months?

He'd like to think he can make it his name instead of his father's, but that rings hollow. The legacy of Pekka Rollins, erstwhile King of the Barrel, has yet to fade and Alby doesn't need it chasing him. But unless he goes down to the Council offices and changes his name, what choice does he have?

At least Jordan doesn't care what he's called; he's just *ljubavi* to her. With this thought, Alby reminds himself that he is not the only one with news. "Speaking of which," he says, "how did school go?"

"You won't believe who I met," Jordan says, shifting to lean back against the chair that they are now sitting in front of. "Do you remember those letters I used to write you, when I first started school?"

Alby laughs softly. "You mean right after we met?" If only his child-self could see him now. Estranged from his father and having just kissed the girl he'd been enamored with since they met. It would be many, many levels of unbelievable.

Jordan's head bobs in a nod. "And how I told you about that boy who called Inej a nobody? And said it was suspicious for me to show up out of nowhere? So I—"

"Hit him." Alby grins. "And kicked dirt on him."

The contented-cat smile has returned. "I might have."

"I can show you the paper trail."

"No need." Jordan waves a hand and shifts her weight, settling more comfortably into a cross-legged pose. "Now guess who I met."

"It wouldn't be this boy, would it?" Alby asks, raising an eyebrow.

Jordan extends her legs on top of Alby's, provoking a slight noise of complaint from him that she fully ignores. "It would! And he sort of apologized, although then he started going on about my very reasonable retaliation methods, which kind of ruined it."

"I hope you showed him how you retaliate *now* ," Alby says, drawing her to him with an arm around her shoulders. Ghezen, he feels happier now than he has in a year at least. It almost feels dangerous, for so many things to be going right at once. Nothing can stay very balanced for very long. He's darkly amused at himself; maybe he's been in Ketterdam too long, if he's regarding comfort as a risk.

"No, because that involves knives, and I didn't need to get expelled on my first day," Jordan says, burrowing in against his side with an excess of elbow-jabbing. Alby grunts.

"So he recognized you?"

Jordan makes an affirmative noise. “He didn’t at first. Especially since my last name’s different now, since Inej and Kaz changed theirs when they got married and then I got it when they adopted me. I was in school with him under *Ghafa,* so.”

Alby imagines, again, a bottle or maybe a certificate framed in the office he’ll have one day, except this time it says *Alby Rietveld.* He knows he’s only seventeen and has done his fair share of laughing at his peers when they carve their initials into desks or scrawl “Mrs. So-and-So” on the corners of their papers, but the idea has a hold on him now. He has to admit, he likes the idea of choosing a name for himself.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Jordan asks. “Your test worked, remember?”

Alby laughs softly. “It’s not done quite yet.” But she’s right. He’s on the tail end of weeks of sleepless nights now, with a trail of ink smudges and discarded paper and empty beakers behind him. The fire glows warm at his side and Jordan’s weight grounds him. He leans his head against the top of hers, her hair soft against his cheek. “Though I suppose it can be done for a little while.”

He can’t see it, but he feels Jordan smile. “That’s the spirit.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for this chapter being short and somewhat lackluster; it is a transition chapter to more exciting things, but I'm aware that I've done better work. I mostly felt like you all had gone too long without an update. I hope you'll bear with me as I revive this fic <3

Alby/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Alby graduates. He celebrates this with his strange new family.

Chapter Notes

I am uh. I am so sorry. My writing muse got up and abandoned me one day and I've been chasing it for the past few months, but I managed to catch it and build up a backlog of chapters so we should be set for a while. We're entering the home stretch now and I'm very, very excited for this last arc <3

now for some incredibly overdue shout-outs~

Heiress_Kyr, I love your way of picking out the little moments <3

maiden_of_crows, my understanding is that it's very common for kids of young parents to often refer to them by their first names—especially with the amount of jordan's life that she spent uncertain of their status as her parents.

jzmn8r, I hope this update makes today better for you too!

thephonyqueenofengland, here's some more jalby just for you!

GNM_dreaming_girl, as far as we know (and to everyone's shock), jordan has not stabbed anyone yet!

cameliawrites, I am also very very pro-Alby Rietveld. poetic justice at its finest.

Lunarmoo, jordan has been trained exactly as one would expect from a kanej child :D

eekabee, I like your point about restoring family, especially since it would do so for kaz and alby equally.

anacsfm, I do also like the sound of Alby Hendriks-Fahey….maiden name? as it were? lol!

LittleDinosaur02, stuff going wrong? in MY fic? never!

sofia_volkov, no one's doing it like her!

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, their parenting style is….interesting, but I guess it works lol!

Pipperdoo, guess who's back 🎶 back again 🎶

singthestars, there are few things I love more than a good binge read!

Rogues_Of_Ketterdam, boy do I have a surprise for you!

WordsMatter, your username is very appropriate! the words you've chosen to share matter a whole lot to me <3

The diploma says *Rollins* in gold foil on purple paper. Alby thinks about false monarchs and Kaelish Princes and Kings of Ketterdam and *that's the risk we run when we make ourselves royal.* He decides to pay attention to the part where it says *Alby* first.

The Boeksplein is swarming with University graduates and their coalitions of family and friends, and for a moment it looks much less foreign to the rest of Ketterdam. Aside from the lack of masks and capes, this sort of directionless throng is exactly the kind that fills the streets of the Staves. Alby wonders if it's putting the former denizens of the Barrel more at ease. For him, however, a scholar raised in a prison of open fields, Ketterdam remains generally dizzying.

Luckily, Jesper has an arm looped firmly around his shoulders as he keeps up a stream of celebratory chatter that Alby can't make out and isn't really paying attention to anyway. Wylan is following them with his head down but keeping close, holding an umbrella over the three of them to shield against the persistent rain.

When they'd told Alby of their plans to be present for the ceremony, he had admittedly been surprised. "Will you need some kind of protection? Being a Councilman?" he'd asked Wylan.

They had given each other one of those shared smiles that Alby still can't interpret and has written off as a lost cause. "I doubt anyone will even notice that I'm there," Wylan assured him. "If the celebrations aren't enough of a distraction, Jesper will be." There was enough fondness in his voice and expression then that Alby had felt as if he shouldn't look at it head-on.

"We may not have Kaz's interest in fussing around with cards and coins, but classic misdirection is another story," Jesper added, flashing a crooked grin.

Alby still remembers thinking, as he often does, that however short their initial acquaintance with Jordan's da had been, it seems to have left a remarkably lasting impact.

Now he's trying to get his bearings and sort out where exactly he's being dragged. "Drinks at the Ostrich?" Jesper suggests.

Wylan checks his watch. "At this rate, we ought to head straight to the gondel if we don't want Elise fussing at us when dinner gets cold. Besides, we have better wine at home."

“But beer,” Jesper suggests.

“I’m sure we have better beer at home as well.”

“Do we? Prissy aristocrats that we are.”

Alby has to crack a smile at that, which he’s fairly certain is the goal. “Isn’t it bad manners to entertain guests drunk, anyway?” he puts in.

“If that’s true, my worst crimes are my social blunders,” Jesper says with false gravity, steering him with surprising strength down a side street lined with entirely brick-fronted buildings.

“Jes, you’ve shot people,” Wylan says drily, peering into a shop window that displays a collection of astronomical instruments.

Alby blinks several times. Perhaps he misheard that. The crowd is more distant now, but still loud, and rain is still drumming on the flagstone streets. “Did I know this?”

Jesper coughs and picks up his pace. “Know what?”

Just when he’s sure the company he keeps couldn’t get stranger, Alby thinks, he always gets surprised. Speaking of surprises, as a matter of fact, Jordan should be joining them at any moment; he scans the tiled rooftops to see if he can predict which one she’ll spring down from.

“Careful. Your neck might get stuck like that.”

He grins, unable to find it within himself to be upset that he was fooled. “Hello, Jordan.”

Jesper mysteriously relinquishes his hold just in time for Jordan to take his place, looping her arm through Alby’s. Her sleeves, like the rest of her, are mysteriously bone-dry; she puts down her hood, and the gold ring in the side of her nose winks in the occasional beam of streetlight. “Just think,” she says eagerly. “No more essays.”

“No more sunrise lectures,” Alby says blissfully.

“No more hours in the lab.”

“Well, I’ll probably still be doing that,” he says with a slight laugh. “But at least I can choose the hours.” She already knows about the offer, but he hasn’t found a chance to tell everyone else, which he’s sure will have them exasperated with him. Maybe he’ll find the right time at dinner tonight.

Jordan grins up at him, and for a moment the rain seems to fade to a whisper. Alby could be fooled into thinking the sun has come out. “I’m proud of you,” she says more quietly, but earnestly all the same.

Evidently not so quiet as to go unheard, for Wylan’s hand briefly clasps Alby’s other shoulder as he says, “So are we.”

What strange company he keeps, indeed.

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Kaz pens a letter to the Fjerdan crown and tells no one.

She'll laugh, of course. He imagines Nina with her new face and old laugh, in furs or some kind of ridiculous knit, complaining to the air about his imprudence. Given how far he's made it past his original life expectancy, imprudence is a strategy he isn't interested in changing at this point.

It's not unreasonable, he composes in his head as he shoulders open the door to the Crow Club and briefly scrutinizes the dealers. The bartender's hand automatically becomes less generous at the sight of him, he notes, but two seconds too slow, which could be the excuse he's been looking for to replace the lazy skiv. *All I'm asking is one of your country's precious heirlooms.*

Actually, now that he considers it, Nina would probably jump at the chance to put a piece of Fjerda's witchhunting history into entirely untrustworthy hands. A reply from her will take weeks at least, but Kaz is no amateur. This is the long game. Years long.

Though she only knows the pieces he's been willing to feed her through cryptic half-mentions and implications in the shape of the unsaid, Inej believes he's making the plan overly lengthy. Given her habit of being right, he would be willing to bet on her. However, given his habit of being stubborn, Kaz carries on with procedure.

He isn't sentimental, but he is practical enough to know what works and keep to it, and the crew he wants for this particular scheme is one that has yet to fail him. Even Matthias Helvar has become part of a setup that was unintentionally begun two-odd decades ago. Kaz's mouth slides into a wry smile. *Your ghost is keeping poor company after all, Helvar. Get in line with all the others waiting to haunt me.* Someone has to fill the vacancy with Jordie no longer having his turn.

Being Kaz Brekker makes slipping away in one's own establishment complicated, but he's not married to Inej for nothing. The air inside the tunnel to Jesper and Wylan's is damp, thanks to the torrential rain battering the streets overhead; still, at least he's not up there picking his way past the flooded canals or clambering onto a browboat with a handful of drenched and shivering pigeons. Packed in, likely. Kaz takes a slow breath. The air is free of salt and rot. Still, he gives a brief tense and release of his shoulders to shake the clinging feeling away. Much like the ever-present pain in his leg, some old aches never disappear, they only ebb and flow.

Wounds with stitches. He has to wonder how much more prevalent Inej's proverbs will become when she has a porch and rocking chair from which to spout them.

She'll likely be headed to the manor now if she isn't there already, having just had tea in Little Ravka with Ria and Sinyen. Meanwhile, Jordan will be making her way over from the University, accompanying Jesper, Wylan, and the guest of honor—the recent graduate, Alby Rollins.

The tunnel is dim and dank with chill, and the air smells slightly metallic, but not with the iron sourness of blood. Good. The Dregs haven't had to clean a body out of it yet, and it would be a waste of resources to start now. He levers himself up the steps and out into the faded mist of the Geldstraat, where the rain has become a limp, unenthusiastic drizzle. Kaz's lip curls slightly. Even the weather is easier on the merchers. He wouldn't be surprised if they pay off the Council of Tides to ensure it's so.

Everything has a price in Ketterdam, after all.

The sky is the color of damp and keeps its promise as he limps down the street, his grip tight on the head of his cane. Somehow the pain has nested in his hip, which is a truly remarkable distance from the old break for it to have traveled.

He files away thoughts of level ground and drier weather. They're beginning to creep up on him now, and they'll go from a distraction to a danger if he isn't cautious.

Just to be contrary, and to avoid dealing with glares from their maid, Kaz lets himself in through the side kitchen door and receives a glare from the cook instead. He tips his hat to her and carries on.

Inej is already in the dining room, having arrived ahead of both Kaz and their hosts as he suspected—except for Marya, to whom she's just been talking. He takes a seat beside her with concealed relief as the ache dulls, hangs his hat on the back of the chair, and raises an eyebrow. *Well?*

"Hello to you also, Mr. Brekker," says Marya with an amused sigh. Kaz scowls, feeling scolded.

"Sinyen and Ria got along like—what is it that Jesper says?—a house fire," Inej replies to the unasked question. "A strange sort of house fire. But suffice it to say they're willing to work to each other's benefit."

"Good." He nods once, sharply. That's another piece of the plan in place then. And each time the reality of it increases. But since he put it in words, since he whispered it to Inej in his parents' farmhouse with his eyes on her face and her hand on his heart, he has given up any chance of turning back.

This is what he gets for becoming a man of debts and vows, wearing rings and making promises. But he does owe it to her. To himself. Maybe even to Jordie, whatever he used to be.

The light in the room flares slightly brighter as Wylan enters with the others, turning a brass knob by the door to bring up the flames in the chandelier. Fanciful merch contraptions. But one of these days when Kaz breaks into the manor he might just try to see how it works.

"You're early," Wylan says. "Hello, Mother." He gives her a brief kiss on the cheek before sitting at the head of the table.

Kaz gives him a flat, challenging look. "You're late," he rasps.

“That’s actually impossible,” says Jesper, loping over to take a seat across from Inej. He looks like a lanky basket of tropical fruit. “The party doesn’t start until I arrive, ergo we’re right on time.”

“Except for under special conditions where I’m not there,” Jordan interjects. “I think the state of ‘party’ actually requires a condition where both of us are present.”

“One or both.”

“Stop talking like you’ve paid attention in any of your lectures,” Kaz says.

“I am a very dedicated scientist,” Jordan argues, mock-affronted, but she sits across from him and pulls out a chair for Alby anyway. “Either way, I now decree this a party.”

“Time for that better beer that we have at home, love?” Jesper says hopefully. Kaz observes Jordan and Alby both failing to not look interested.

“You can’t survive a first course with us sober?” Inej asks with a glitter of mischief in her eye. Wylan just sighs heavily.

Jesper flings up his hands. “All right. I give. But never say I don’t try, Alby.”

Alby shakes his head quite seriously. He is eighteen and of age now, but Kaz strongly doubts that drink was any rarity for him before either. “Of course not.”

The food is brought out and, as per usual, Kaz picks through the main course and takes dessert at his leisure under many exasperated looks from Inej. This is interspersed with a slow draining of the coffee pot that continues to be refilled by a maid he recognizes as Beatrix, who dotes on Alby and barely tolerates Kaz.

Much to Jesper’s disappointment, the drinks are wine again, but when he realizes it’s the cherry wine from the Crow Club, he perks up and begins spinning a story about the feral cat that they keep finding in the house.

“It’ll come in through any open door, and sometimes I think it even figures out the closed ones,” he says, illustrating his point with vague hand gestures that are getting progressively more animated. “I’ll swear on my best pair of boots that it never even takes food. Just socks, pens—”

“Buttons,” Alby adds.

“Handkerchiefs,” Wylan puts in.

“Paintbrushes,” Marya muses, sipping her iced water.

“You should name it Kaz,” Jordan mutters. Alby coughs into his glass. Kaz cuts her a halfhearted glare.

“You might see it while you’re here,” Wylan says, refilling Marya’s glass from the vase that remains fogged with condensation. “It’s almost like it wants to get caught.”

“You should definitely name it Kaz,” Jordan says, slightly louder. Kaz dials the glare up to three-quarters but isn’t surprised when she seems entirely unperturbed.

Inej addresses Alby rather pointedly, which is just as well given that Jesper is running out of tales of the cat’s exploits. “Did they give you some sort of honor for your project? Since you came up with a treatment that could actually work?”

Kaz thinks of the Church of Ghezen and false prayers, respects being paid to those who died before they had a chance to lose faith.

Alby shrugs, though Kaz notes that his posture stiffens when the attention turns on him. “Just some extra gold foil on the certificate and a pin for my cap. I don’t know that it’ll mean anything. But…I did get an offer from one of my professors to stay on with the department.” He gives a nervous smile. “To develop it for real.”

Kaz watches Jesper and Wylan’s faces. Predictably, they split into grins that have gotten noticeably more similar over the years. “What convinced them?” Wylan asks.

“Well—the fact that I came up with actual tests we could do, mostly. Remember that presentation I was worrying about a few weeks ago?”

The other three residents of the house nod, almost amusingly rapt.

“Right.” He smoothes down his cuffs. “The last missing piece was to find a—a survivor. Someone who already had the immunity. To figure out what they had that you’d need to recover, and probably also run tests.” He nods slowly as if to himself. “And I found a volunteer. So the university agreed to fund my research.”

Jordan, Jesper, Wylan, and Marya all begin peppering him with questions, but Inej’s silence seems to drown them out. Kaz feels her hand cover his, still gloved due to present company.

He turns his hand over to interlock their fingers, studying the crumbs on his plate with great intent.

“Saints,” she breathes for only him to hear. “You didn’t.”

Alby, Kaz notes, is not looking at him at all. Work is akin to prayer. Zentsbridge. The Church of Barter. The headstone in the snow. He has never wanted forgiveness or sought absolution, but at the end of it all grief is just another god that asks for sacrifice.

And with the price he’s about to pay for peace, Dirtyhands needs his debts well and truly settled.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan treats her first patient. She returns home to a different conversation than she was expecting.

Chapter Notes

apologies for the slightly late post, but at least in my time zone it's still friday, lol. I won't make you wait any longer for your shout-outs~

maiden_of_crows, a surprising amount of people pointed out that line, but in retrospect it makes sense—it means a lot more than it says.

thestarsinoureyes, it's good to be back and breaking your hearts again!

thephonyqueenofengland, we should *all* be proud of alby :)

Rogues_of_Ketterdam, I am also very, very excited for this arc! I've been planning it for years now and I can't wait to share it with you all <3

WordsMatter, Alby had a terrible father so I gave him TWO good ones…as a treat

IhateMyLifeButSOCForever, I promise I *will* read KoS and RoW….eventually

Lunarmoo, I love that I get to look forward to your comments every week again!

GNM_dreaming_girl, the pieces of the scheme are slowly unfolding….

Heiress_Kyr, I also love writing Kaz povs:D

jzmn8r, I apologize for the tears, but only a little bit.

Jordan is nervous and she hates it.

She regularly dances over rooftops and spires many stories above the cobbled streets. She can shoot, stab, bludgeon, and concoct a makeshift weapon out of pretty much anything with impressive accuracy. She tended a wound in the middle of a gunfight with next to no training on a ship that might sink any minute. She was kidnapped when she was nine, swam to

freedom, and got a boyfriend out of it. She has even managed to talk about feelings and memories with her inscrutable fortress of a father.

So why does this, her first day of apprenticeship at the university medical center, make her heart buzz like a hummingbird against her ribs? This is arguably the least dangerous situation she's experienced in a very long time. Yes, the women's medik coat fits a bit too tightly around the shoulders and sleeve holes, and yes, she isn't entirely sure that she's walking down the correct hallway, but Saints, it's not as if her life is on the line. She knows how that feels.

The injury ward features a small front room with a desk, manned by a bored-looking student receptionist with thick dark hair and a missing front tooth, and a curtained door that Jordan assumes leads to some sort of patient area full of beds. She hopes they don't send her to the operating theater just yet, though it's not as if she'll swoon at the sight of gore. If dissections and cadaver studies didn't do the trick, her years on Inej's ship would have.

She puts the printed card with her name and department on it, courtesy of her instructors, face-up on the desk. The girl glances over it. "Dr. de Malle is waiting for you in the ward," she says, flicking her head back towards the curtained door as if to shoo away a fly. Jordan gives her most prompt and professional nod and heads through the curtained door.

The sound of that name allows her to relax somewhat. At least she's being mentored (and judged) by an instructor she knows and likes.

The room is lined with beds, similar curtains between them. Jordan reminds herself not to gape at anything as she walks down the rows; she ought to look like this is nothing new to her. *Dr. de Malle.* She scans without lingering for a white coat, now coming into vogue as the uniform for physicians rather than the black garb they used to wear. Jordan somewhat wishes they'd stuck with the black, but she is at least aware that white is more practical.

From the back of the room, she recognizes Sofia de Malle approaching her—the instructor from her first lecture, as it happens. As usual, Dr. de Malle's curtain of auburn hair is wound into a knot as firm as a ship's rope, and her stern expression softens minutely when she catches sight of Jordan.

Jordan doesn't expect much in the way of friendly greetings or congratulations on finding the right ward; frankly, if she'd gotten lost, she isn't sure Dr. de Malle would have let her continue in this field of study, which may have been for the best if she couldn't handle something that simple. But she does receive a smile from her mentoring medik, which is plenty for Jordan.

"Am I starting with observation? Or making rounds?" Jordan asks, glancing over the occupied beds on the ward. There aren't many, which she supposes is lucky for the student body and surrounding citizens, but it also limits her options.

"We could start there," Dr. de Malle says musingly, "if you'd like." She isn't quite looking at Jordan, but her tone says she's expecting some specific reply.

"We could," Jordan says, "but you think I'm going to be bored with that."

“And am I correct?” A slight smile plays around her mentor’s lips.

“Completely,” Jordan admits, tucking her hands into her coat pockets. She has done her share of observation for classes by now, this being her final year, and while she hasn’t specifically participated in making rounds, it sounds like essentially more of the same.

Dr. de Malle’s smile grows, just barely. “Of course I am. How does a fracture sound?”

Jordan knows her parents would laugh if they could see the way that she perks up now, and probably Alby too, but she chooses not to care. That reminds her that she wants to stop by the lab after this and bother him with anecdotes about her day. “Now that’s more like it,” she says with a grin.

“I thought so.” Dr. de Malle puts a hand on her shoulder and steers her towards one of the beds the back-left corner of the room. “I’m not a monster, so this is straightforward as fractures go, but don’t let that make you sloppy.” Jordan understands the implications of this statement: *I’m trusting you not to mess this up*. It’s a compliment and a bit of a threat in one, and the fact that she finds this comfortingly familiar is probably not something she needs to examine right now.

As they walk, Dr. de Malle lists off relevant information about the patient. “Daan Hembrecht. Sixteen, male. He came in this morning, approximately two hours ago, after taking a nasty spill on a patch of ice.”

Jordan feels as if she recognizes that name. Searching her memory, she says, “Hembrecht? His father’s a mercher, isn’t he?”

“A Councilman,” Dr. de Malle says with pursed lips. Jordan agrees with the implied opinion. Wylan always seems to be complaining about how Maurits Hembrecht and his pedantic, obsessive nature have become the main obstacles to any real changes in Kerch law. Who knows how much more trouble the man might have caused if Kaz didn’t have information on him.

They have reached the patient in question by now; Daan Hembrecht is weedy and pale, with a fluff of cornsilk hair that makes him look like the cattails that grow along the shores of the Southern Colonies. The yellowy lighting isn’t doing him any favors. His lower leg is splinted, wrapped in plaster, and elevated in a sling.

Part of Jordan wants to laugh. Dr. de Malle didn’t tell her where the break was before now. How lucky is this, that they’ve given her a patient to whom she can give the best and most thorough advice?

“Mr. Hembrecht,” Dr. de Malle says, “this is my student, Jordan Rietveld. She’s going to be attending to you with me as her overseer.”

Daan groans. “It still hurts.” His voice is thin and hollow, too, with a slight whistle to it. “Can’t you give me anything stronger?”

Jordan looks to Dr. de Malle, expecting her to respond, but she just looks back. Jordan takes the cue and says, with more confidence than she feels, “Not in good conscience.”

“Why not?” he whines.

Jordan finds that the answer is lined up on her tongue, and now her heart is settling into its pace. She chose this, she remembers, because she has a pair of hands that move like a prayer, and this sterile ward with its blistery lighting is her chapel. She wonders again if the Saints mind that she prays in Kerch. She wonders if they mind that she prays through her work, as if to a foreign god. “Because addiction is easy to come by and hard to lose.” She has seen Jesper grasp his husband’s hand just a bit more tightly when they have occasion to walk by East Stave, and though she has met her precious few times, Jordan has heard the stories about and from her mother’s best friend Nina. They were both strong enough. She doesn’t have that kind of faith in this boy.

Beside her, Dr. de Malle nods slowly, approvingly. Jordan bites back a proud smile.

“May I touch you?” she asks, habitual as breathing. “I want to examine the break.”

He nods warily. At least he isn’t complaining about having a girl for a medik, which Jordan was worried about. It would be a struggle to still treat a patient after that. She sets her hands to the plaster, inspecting the way it was put on, and as new as it is, the motion feels comfortable, routine. If it’s a prayer, it’s one of gratitude.

“It’s your shin that’s broken, but they probably already told you that,” she says, as much to herself as to Daan. She’s relieved that Dr. de Malle doesn’t correct her for not using the technical, medical term; it always comes more naturally for her to speak plainly to patients. “The most important thing is—look at me when I say this.” He does, and Jordan looks squarely into his watery greyish eyes. “Let it heal. Do not try to walk on it a day too soon. Rest exactly as long as you’re told to, and maybe a bit more for good measure. You’ll be paying the price for the rest of your life if you don’t.”

She’s definitely going to hear about how her bedside manner needs work after this, but if he looks somewhat shaken, she can at least be sure that her message was heard. “In the meantime,” she says, trying to soften her tone a bit, “once they let you down from that sling, stretch it out when you can. Keep it propped up on something. It’ll ease the pain, at least a little.”

Daan Hembrechts nods mutely. Jordan glances at her mentor, who says, “Thank you for your time, Mr. Hembrechts. One of the nurses will come check on you shortly.”

Jordan takes this as her cue and follows Dr. de Malle to her next patient, her next step, her next prayer.

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The afternoon is fading into a cloudy twilight by the time Jordan makes it over to the lab, her white coat taken off and stowed away. Most of the gleaming tables are tidy and empty, their

equipment silent and unused, but Alby is still there under the single light that remains on, collecting his things into a large, cumbersome bag.

“So many papers,” Jordan comments, scooping one up at random from the pages that remain scattered over his worktable. “I thought that by this point you’d be making things fizz and explode.”

“More fizzing than exploding,” Alby says, “but there’s some of that too.”

Jordan vaults neatly over the table and he gives her a swift kiss, looking amused. “What?” she demands.

“Just that you could’ve walked around.”

“That isn’t nearly as fun,” Jordan points out.

Alby finishes packing up whatever won’t be staying here in the lab. “Where are you off to? I can walk with you.”

Jordan hesitates, leaning back against the table. She looks at the toes of her shoes. “Well—I was going to go home.”

“Ah.”

The silence that hangs between them like cobwebs is more frustrated than uncomfortable. Jordan understands that Thirteen Zelverstraat is a last bastion of safety for her parents, the vault where they keep the secret of their family, of her. She knows the cruelties that that kind of information can buy. But Alby hasn’t heard from nor spoken to his father in two years.

She takes his hand, squeezing it tight. Alby’s eyes flicker unsurely to meet hers. “I’ll talk to them, okay, *ljubavi*? I haven’t asked in a while. Maybe it’ll be different this time.”

Doubt is scrawled across Alby’s face but he has the good grace to not say anything about it. “Okay.” He gives a sigh, then winds one arm around Jordan’s back and pulls her to him. She gives herself a moment to inhale the scent of him, something she can’t describe other than comfort, other than safety. Other than him, her boy. Her love, even if he doesn’t know she’s calling him that. Then, she presses a short but searing kiss to his lips, cupping the back of his neck, her fingers sliding up into the hair that curls around his collar.

“Your hair is getting long,” she says close to his mouth.

Alby gives a low chuckle. “Should I cut it?”

She kisses him again. “No.”

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As Jordan slips through the blue front door of Thirteen Zelverstraat and toes off her shoes, she’s already talking. “They paired me with Dr. de Malle, you know, the instructor that I like, and you’ll never guess who my first—”

She pauses in the doorway to the sitting room, where Kaz and Inej are sitting and looking at her. It's not entirely unusual for her da to be home at this hour; most of his business on the Staves and around the Slat is nocturnal. But she doesn't like their silence. She doesn't like the set of their expressions, like they're about to face some new fight. Her stomach sinks. "What business?" she says automatically, looking between her parents.

Inej cracks a slight smile. "No business to speak of. How was it?"

Jordan warily walks into the room and goes to sit on the Ravkan rug in front of the fireplace, but something still feels wrong here. She just isn't sure how to ask. She's never had much luck getting her parents to tell her things until they want to, and sometimes it makes her so frustrated she feels like screaming. But that's who they are. She knows it and she knows why —more or less.

Still…

She remembers the hurt, the doubt in Alby's face. Two years. Two years of dining at their friends' table, of being alone with her, for Saints' sake, and she knows that Kaz is working with him somehow even if he won't say it. Surely the whole mess with the Thorn was enough for Alby to prove something. But maybe this isn't about him at all. How would she know?

"Forget that for a second," Jordan says cautiously. Both of them are dark-eyed where they sit facing the fire, and Jordan rarely feels so reminded that she is adopted, but in these moments it stings. They are Ketterdam's criminal royalty, a united force whose secrets she will never quite be let into. "You can't just sit there looking like that and not tell me what it's about."

"Can't I?" says Kaz, raising an eyebrow, but in the next moment he exhales and his expression smoothes over.

"We were going to tell her," Inej reminds him.

Jordan is about to throw herself out the window. "Tell me what?"

Somehow she expects Inej to be the one to answer. She's usually the one to draw connections between whatever scraps of information Kaz gives up. But instead, it's Kaz who speaks, his voice the steady rasp of erosion, and Jordan knows the moment she hears it that whatever is coming is inevitable and has always been. Somehow she just managed to miss it. "In the next year," he says evenly, "Ria will be taking over the Dregs."

"And Sinyen will take up the mantle of the Wraith," Inej adds.

For once in her life, Jordan is speechless. Somehow she expects alarms, or cracks of thunder, maybe wailing sirens from the harbor or a sudden roaring storm, but there is nothing except the continuing crackle of the fireplace. They're still looking at her.

Put the pieces together. She is clever enough to do it. So is a six-year-old. But her mind refuses to connect them. The certainty and rhythm of the day's work is gone, replaced by discord and empty skies.

Is this what she prayed for? She really isn't sure.

"We need you to understand that this will be dangerous," Inej is going on, though Jordan doesn't know how capable she is of taking in more. "We have a plan that will go into motion soon, but—the risk is high."

Inej doesn't want to be saying this, Jordan thinks. There's a strain in her voice, in the muscle of her neck, a rope or wire pulled far too tight. She wants there to be another way. Jordan does too.

"Can't you just leave?" she asks. "Why a whole plan? Why take the chance?"

"Not without being followed," says Kaz, hands clasped neatly in front of him, impassive as usual. Kaz Brekker, the monster whose lair is Ketterdam. Somehow the same man who plans to leave it all behind. *Come back and be my da again*, Jordan wants to demand. But this is her da. It's just a part of him that she could do without.

"Okay." She takes a deep breath. She was going to ask about Alby, and at some point she still will—she has to keep her word—but here in the quiet of winter and revelation isn't the time. "You can—you can tell me the plan. But can we have hot chocolate after?"

There's a strange, melancholy amusement in the shadow of a smile that Kaz gives her, and Jordan thinks that perhaps this is what she prayed for after all. Maybe, when all is said and done, he'll be free to smile more often. "Yes, Jordan," he says in his gravel-scrape voice. "Yes, we can."

Inej

Chapter Summary

Inej talks to Jordan. They nest in the high places.

Chapter Notes

happy three years (!!!) to this fic! to the day, actually. did I have any idea what this would become three years ago today when I hit “publish”? not even close. it was all hopes and zero expectations. but you, you lovely person reading this, are all that I ever hoped for <3

and now for some celebratory shout-outs~

fitzsavorycracker, jordan’s dynamic with her da is endlessly important to me.

WordsMatter, I didn’t even realize it had taken me this long to write a kiss from Jordan’s POV. shame on me, honestly.

GNM_dreaming_girl, something something, not saying goodbye but letting go….

thephonyqueenofengland, if there’s one thing about me, it’s that I WILL talk about religious symbolism.

maiden_of_crows, I think we’re all proud of Jordan, honestly <3

Lunarmoo, my fancast of Alby is roughly
the same, just with about an inch or two more hair, lol.

jzmn8r, jordan is speaking to daan from EXPERIENCE

Heiress_Kyr, the plan is….so ridiculously complicated.

Rogues_of_Ketterdam, I talk a lot about the things jordan has learned from having the parents she has, but I think she would’ve picked up certain things from the other members of her honorary family too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mugs were discarded in the sink short moments ago, and Jordan has already vanished upstairs.

Inej has a feeling that she knows where her little crow has gone. She looks to Kaz, who is already pocketing his ring and limping to the kitchen; *Go*, she imagines him saying. Hopefully they'll still speak when it's the two of them in the rural quiet and not just guess each other's thoughts, she thinks, taking any scraps of amusement that she can get to scaffold her fear.

Jordan must be afraid. Inej knows because she ran, because it's what she herself would do. When trouble comes, they nest in the high places.

With this thought playing in her mind, she makes quick work of the staircase and heads down the walnut-clad hallway to Jordan's room, where she pushes lightly on the door. It isn't fully shut, so she gives it another nudge, just enough to see the room empty and the window cracked.

The thief they trained would never make such a mistake. Inej takes this as permission enough.

She leaps neatly over the bed, with its plush red comforter and squashed pillows, onto the sill and slides the window up in a smooth motion. She has always insisted on making sure that theirs neither stick nor squeak. Then she is out on the roof, on the back side of the house that faces the distant black ribbon of the canal and blocks upon blocks of hazy Ketterdam sprawl.

Jordan is sitting barely a yard down the slope, her hood up against the drizzle, arms wrapped around her knees. She isn't trying to hide. Inej crosses the small distance in her usual silence and goes to sit beside her daughter.

It isn't raining hard enough to make noise, and they aren't close enough to the harbor to hear gulls. All that remains is the low drone of voices, impossible to parse, and the persistent growl of an increasingly mechanized city. Inej allows the silence its place. It is her ally and she trusts it to be kind interrogating Jordan.

The quiet doesn't need to exert much pressure before she breaks it. Jordan has never much liked silences. "How long have you known?" she says.

Inej, for her part, is much more at ease with quiet, and sometimes wishes she had more of it. Or that it could be enough. "Since we visited the farmhouse," she says softly, looking out over the rows of houses and offices, and other buildings further off, that get more blurry and cramped as they recede into the distance.

Jordan exhales sharply. "That long?" She sounds stung. Inej understands. She knows they had their reasons and she knows what they were. She just isn't sure how to say them.

Jordan draws her knees in more tightly. "I guess I should be used to you guys keeping secrets."

Now they're both hurt, but Inej tries to manage her own. If she springs to defend herself, she'll have come up here for nothing. "If this goes right, we won't have to anymore."

“Except the secret that you exist,” Jordan points out, her voice growing stronger as more bitterness leeches in. “There’s that.”

Again Inej is quiet. She senses that Jordan has more to say, even if she doesn’t know it yet. They are two dark smudges against the gray sky—pirates, navigators, explorers, but in this moment entirely lost. Unmoored. Their anchor is in the kitchen washing cups the way he’ll wash blood from his hands later tonight. But they need to learn to find their way home.

She thinks of Jordan, nine and crawling from the harbor, drenched and brave and proud. Maybe Jordan already knows. Maybe Inej is finally learning. Maybe when Sinyen takes the wheel of her fleet she’ll have done it.

Jordan hesitates, then, with a softness Inej knows she’s having to force, says, “You said it would be dangerous. If you’re admitting that then…how bad is it?”

You’re a dangerous girl. I would prefer you never become dangerous to me.

“The risk for me is manageable. My chances are good.” This much is true. She will be free and whole as long as she is not caught. And that happens to be one of the Wraith’s specialties.

Jordan, however, catches hold of the unsaid. “But Kaz.”

It’s a feverish, paralyzing dream of a plan. It’s a legend in the making. It could quite easily cost Inej her husband, the heart with her patchwork pieces. She would be lying if she said she does not fear that Kaz will be her penance, that the Saints have not forgiven the blood she’s shed. That the future they’re carefully constructing of twigs and twine is a life too kind for someone like her.

“He says the odds are good enough.” It comes out in a near-whisper.

How many times? How many times have they bet their lives on Makker’s Wheel, given them up as collateral, paid with them for stocks that could crash with the next sinking fleet? The loss is coming. Inej can feel it hovering over her, cold hands reaching for her shoulders, her ribs, her sternum. Her shoulders where her wings should be. It could be a punishment from the Saints or it could be pure chance, but her beliefs and Kaz’s both point to the same thing coming.

“You can change his mind.” Jordan is trying not to plead, but she is and Inej doesn’t blame her. She has told herself the same thing.

“Not about this.”

Jordan drops her head onto her arms, her fizzing, sparkling, overrunning energy flat and momentarily drained. Inej watches her breathe. Should she take Jordan into her arms? Whisper meaningless Suli comforts? Comb through her hair? Leave her alone?

Some days she almost knows how to be a mother. Days like today, she is nineteen again with a tiny, fragile child cradled in her calloused hands and so, so afraid.

Jordan turns her face up to the sky, blinking fast; the mist pearls in her eyebrows and lashes. “I don’t—” She swallows hard and squeezes her eyes shut tight. “I lost one mama already. I can’t do that again.”

Nineteen and terrified, Inej went to her mother for help. Somehow it was simpler even then, even with the same years and the same Ketterdam in between them. *You just love as hard as you can*, her mama had said, *and the rest will fall into place.*

Is it? Is this how it falls into place? Inej sends up a prayer she isn’t sure she deserves to have answered. She loves her daughter more than her own soul. She may never know if it’s enough. But she has never been able to afford to wonder these things and wait until she finds out. Just as the invisible girls learn to wring magic from the ordinary, so she will wring all the truth that she can from her love for Jordan and keep praying to the faith that kept her hope alive through the Menagerie and everything since.

She puts her arm out to Jordan, and Jordan scoots over and curls against her side.

“You will not lose us,” says Inej, lying with a skill that Kaz would be proud of. And yet, she feels a whisper of conviction in it. So many times facing the impossible. So many schemes. Maybe she is a fool, but is it really so unlikely that they could do it again?

Kaz’s whiskey-soaked letter from years ago now is still committed to her memory. *I’ll take her home*, he’d said. *Show her the apple trees and the creek and buy her so many sweets at the bakery that you’ll scowl at me in that glorious way you do—because you’ll be there, too. We’ll be together, we’ll be safe*. People could and had say what they wanted about Kaz Brekker, but never that he didn’t keep his word. Inej aches to believe this promise. She knows he was drunk and maudlin writing it, but perhaps he meant it all the same.

“Pray for us, *meja*,” she says, clutching Jordan tight. Now it is her turn to blink stinging eyes upwards into the spitting rain. *Perhaps the Saints will look on you with kinder favor. You deserve their mercy.*

She knows her mother would scold her; she would say that these things don’t work that way. But still Inej asks. Still she hopes. Still she remembers that hope makes her dangerous.

Jordan’s voice is fragile, thin as ice. “Is it all right if I pray in Kerch?”

The rain is picking up now. Inej cradles Jordan, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, and rocks her baby, a girl now almost grown. Now almost as old as Inej was herself when she found a little Suli child blinking in a ship’s dark hold. “Of course, meja,” she says, and she begins to hum a lullaby in a voice made rough by salt and storm, a song about a child of the wind that she hasn’t sung in years. “Of course you can.”

Chapter End Notes

I probably should've mentioned this before, but since there's next to zero canon info about it, I decided to make the average university degree path three years instead of the modern four, mostly for timeline convenience. so it's been about a year and a half since Alby graduated. Alby is 20 now and Jordan is 18 turning 19 soon.

Inej/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz holds court, then undertakes a mission alone.

Chapter Notes

hello all! I really enjoyed sowing fear in you last chapter, but I do feel like I owe you *something* for putting up with me. so here are your shout-outs~

thestarsinoureyes, this seems like a good time to mention in relation to that quote that the Suli seem to see home as people rather than places...

fitzsavorycracker, I hope the help reached you in time lol

thephonyqueenofengland, I give inej like...three days before she starts climbing trees

shieldmaiden19, so about that suspense....

GNM_dreaming_girl, the next chapter has arrived!

Dayanna_Cahill_Fray_Chase, I would love to tell you that the plan is going to make more sense after this one. I really would.

Lunarmoo, jordan totally left the window open on purpose, knowing who her parents are.

jzmn8r, I wonder what's going onnnnnn hehe

WordsMatter, I love details and parallels too! I guess that's why I use them, lol.

jaba (luelijah), that realization shook me for a long minute.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A heavily-guarded ship arrives in Ketterdam Harbor in the early morning, sharp-hulled and flying the Fjerdan flag. Shortly after, a little spider crawls in through one of the upper windows of the Slat with salt on her dark clothes and a message in her pocket. And as the sun rises, Dirtyhands holds court.

The private parlor at the Silver Six is furnished with shadows and echoes of the past. Jesper sits at Wylan's side, squeezing his hand when the clatter of wheels and chips gets particularly loud. Wylan's gaze is harder and narrower than it was once, but no less forced into evenness. Inej watches from her perch on a chair in the corner. And Jordan stands at Kaz's shoulder, occasionally nudging him or whispering in his ear.

It's almost like it was before. Nina is here at a distance, the one who sent the ship, and they leave an extra empty chair that no one discusses.

No mourners , Inej thinks. *No funerals.* It's a promise, if the only promise any of them plan to keep.

Well…Perhaps not. She and Kaz may hide their rings in public, but Jesper and Wylan have no such need, and even Nina has made her vows. Whatever grew between them in the dangers of the Ice Court and all that came after has taught faithfulness to even the most faithless ones among them.

Except Matthias. Maybe he had already learned it. Maybe that's why he had to be the one who didn't make it. Kaz teases her still for being pious, his little Suli idealist, the righteous Wraith, but Matthias was the most pious of them, the most honorable, and to her soul she knows it.

"The circlet will be delivered to the embassy tonight," Kaz is saying, hands folded neatly over the carved head of his cane in a gesture she must have seen a thousand times by now. But how many, how few more?

Part of her wants to ask him to do it again, just in case.

His black gaze rakes briefly over the assembly, except of course Jordan, who is leaning on the back of his chair. "But they won't present it until tomorrow morning. That's when the finest Kerch has to offer, or supposedly the most trustworthy—" He gives the Councilman in the room a significant nod. "Will be invited to view the finest that Fjerda is willing to offer."

"Note the difference," says Jordan, beginning to sharpen one of her knives.

Jesper leans forward, elbows on knees, though he doesn't relinquish his husband's hand. "So the best Fjerda *will* offer to celebrate the fiftieth—"

"Hundreth," says a very skeptical-looking Wylan.

"—Whatever anniversary of their Ketterdam embassy is the kind-of crown that belonged to some second-born princess."

"Princess Astrid," Inej fills in, "who is significant because—essentially—her brother ordered the construction of the embassy."

"So he's the one who actually did anything," Jesper says with a raised eyebrow.

"It's Fjerda," says Inej.

“Point taken.”

Wylan knocks once on the table, which amusingly seems to intend and garner the same effect as Kaz striking his cane against the floor. “This is all lovely, but Kaz, you know we’re staying out of illegal activity. Ghezen knows we can’t stop you three, but I can and will stop Jes.”

“And you, righteous Councilman, won’t have to step close enough to the line of the law to trip over it,” Kaz replies, drumming his fingers against the back of the opposite hand.

“That includes aiding and abetting.”

“You won’t aid or abet as much as enable,” Jordan says optimistically. “Which you’re really doing already, anyway.”

Wylan sighs heavily. Somewhere outside, the sounds of a brief scuffle can be heard, which is somewhat concerning for this early in the morning. “If my hair starts falling out, it won’t be because of my father’s genetics. It’ll be entirely your fault.”

“It’s true,” Jesper says mock-solemnly. “He starts tearing it out by the handful every time you lot leave the house. It’s a marvel there’s any left.”

Inej gives him a look that is roughly as pointed as one of her knives. If anyone knows how exasperating Kaz and Jordan can be, it is she herself—though she does have to admit that she is not a much easier person to care for. They are all a bit too friendly with danger and dine at its table on a regular basis.

“We’ve all done our grieving for your hairline,” Kaz says with a conceding tilt of his head. “It was a foregone conclusion. But whether you’re in my crew or not, I need you focused.”

“No can do,” Jesper says cheerfully and quite correctly. “Never could, really.”

“I’ll, uh, do my best?” says Jordan, who will be graduating in two short months and has somehow made it through on incomprehensible notes and a set of reasoning skills she learned from her father.

Kaz’s glare doesn’t quite cut through their joking the way that it used to; unfortunately, the collection of people in this room are at a safe distance from memories of Dirtyhands’ gory brutality and much more acquainted with his tendency to act like an ornery house cat. Still, their chatter winds down quickly enough. “Today will be for the papers to make a lot of noise about the security of the embassy. Elsje already brought back most of the details they’ll be publishing.”

“Sounds like a trap for thieves,” Jesper says skeptically, bouncing his knee. “Far be it from me to think you haven’t already figured this out, but Kaz, don’t you think there’s a catch?”

Inej watches Kaz’s face intently, which is how she’s able to pinpoint the moment it becomes just slightly more smug. “You leave that to me,” he says, with all the bravado he had at seventeen and significantly more experience to back it. “You won’t have to fire a shot. Not yet

Wylan leans forward impatiently. “Not *yet* ? Kaz, why drag us here and tell us this at all?”

As per usual, Kaz accepts the challenge unbothered; though Wylan has developed a formidable glare over the years and significantly more strength of argument, Kaz is still Dirtyhands, the monster congealed from Ketterdam’s bloodshed and vice—or so they say. Inej wonders if those stories will still be told and believed when all is said and done. When you kill a legend, do you kill its legacy too? Or do you ensure a kind of immortality?

“Your job,” says Kaz, comfortably readjusting his hands on the head of his cane, “is to ruin the plan.”

“We’re actually shockingly bad at that,” Jesper says.

“Not if the plan needs you to be on time,” Inej murmurs. Jordan snickers, but the others appear to not have heard, and one can never tell with Kaz.

“Not in this way,” says Kaz, and for a moment his black eyes glitter with the reflections of false jewels encrusting the walls, which themselves refract the lantern-light in a prismic array of color. “Wylan, in fact, has practice at it.”

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The details having slowly unfurled in the company of the only crew he trusts, in a club whose name they may or may not have inspired, Kaz is ready to undertake his part of the scheme. And despite the seamless teamwork he and Inej have developed over the years, this a task he has to complete alone.

Strange that he makes that decision with some chagrin. It used to be the way he preferred to operate. Maybe it was so for a reason. Maybe he has let himself forget.

In this part of the city, Kaz can’t so easily use the trappings of the Komedie Brute as a disguise—and what a shame that is. He prefers it on the Staves, where one can only assume the pigeons have accepted the fact that there are thieves among them and decided to make the thieves’ lives significantly easier. But a legend is just as much of a costume, and without it, it’s shockingly easy for him to go unrecognized.

All it takes is a collar turned up high and a face bent low beneath the brim of his hat, and most passers-by don’t bother to peer at him between the persistent sheets of rain. Having decided to forgo his cane in the interests of not being recognized, Kaz takes a browboat along the Almhentcanal to the Government District, one of the three canals surrounding the Church of Barter which bear the words written above the Exchange.

He has already filled his most memorable scars with a putty that became popular in the wake of the Queen’s Lady and was overproduced after their false plague, in the expectation of another rise in demand. Needless to say, it sells cheaply now. He has also given himself a false beard with a dark powder sold in the same sorts of shops, which Inej looked at appraisingly and then pulled a face, shaking her head.

At the time, he'd made a note to shave the following morning. Now, however, he catches himself in a window and frowns slightly; he doesn't see what's so wrong with the beard, really.

Nothing that crown can't fix , he reminds himself. Damn Nina Zenik and her jabs at his haircut, which has not changed in two decades and counting. In part, yes, to spite her, but that's not the sort of thing Kaz is in the business of admitting.

Dregs safehouses are scarce in this part of the city, but not nonexistent because he knows better; the one Kaz heads to is a former munitions warehouse that supplied the guardstaff of the embassies for some thirty years before a bout of international bickering about weapons manufacturing rendered it useless. It has sat for some time now in the hands of a small-time businessman from the suburbs—one of his many aliases—and is mostly empty, aside from a few rations and, of course, uniforms.

Instead of bothering to carry a key, Kaz has simply secured the warehouse with a lock that few other lockpicks can find their way around. It falls open in his palm after a well-practiced maneuver, and he slips inside.

The warehouse looks larger for its emptiness, but it is still barely big enough to count as a warehouse. More of a storehouse at best. It is bracketed on either side by offices staffed only by night clerks, as far as Kaz can tell, who seem to do little else other than keep the lights on and deter thieves with their presence.

There'll be no need for that today. He's got his sights on a much flashier prize than the papers in those offices.

Kaz shrugs off his bulky, grayish duster and swaps into the most well-preserved of his stockpiled *stadwatch* uniforms. Some of them have grown too small, which really shouldn't be surprising. The fact remains that he lived like he was starving for much longer than he strictly needed to.

But that's the reason, isn't it? He may not need one, but he has one. Maybe there's a day that he doesn't have to be hungry—for vengeance, for bloodshed, for gold, for another piece of the city that broke and built and burned him, that battered and buried and birthed him. Maybe that's the day he goes home.

He remembers what he said before. *Build something new. Watch it burn.*

The trouble is that what he's built has turned out to be worth saving from the ashes.

Kaz shakes off these thoughts as he slings the emblazoned rifle over his shoulder and hooks the baton to his belt. He'll always prefer a pistol for a firearm and his cane for old-fashioned blunt force, but the ruse requires sacrifices, these being the smallest among them. It takes some fishing among the stacked and dust-laden boxes to find two pairs of cuffs, both of which he pocketed many years ago after slipping out of them. This is at least the fourth Dregs storehouse they've found their way to, and now he hangs them from his belt on the opposite side.

After stepping outside and snapping the lock shut, Kaz braces himself for the walk to the Fjerdan embassy. It's only two streets over, but he can't go straight there; outside of emergencies, *stadwatch* grunts patrol up and down every street they come across, presumably to appear more diligent. Or they're just looking for urchins to roust from bridges and alleyway squats.

He keeps a stiff gait, pausing at one corner to polish his impressively-counterfeited badge, then carries on, up and down each aching length of cobbles to the embassy. It's composed mostly of windows in order to give the illusion of openness to the public, although Kaz happens to know that the offices of any real importance are buried in the interior of the building's layout. The circlet is being displayed in the lobby, which is currently closed-off to anyone unauthorized until the unveiling tomorrow morning.

Because of this, it's the lobby that is crawling with embassy security and Fjerdan personnel; Kaz continues to the end of the street and loops around to the back of the building, where embassy employees are currently being redirected for entrance. Here, there is only one bored-looking embassy guard.

Kaz strides up to him. He's young, thin, but decent at putting on a stern face. "Sergeant Casper Baas, from the Zelverstraat department," says Kaz, briefly flashing his badge. It's a lazy alias, but he enjoys the private joke. He gives the guard a fatherly smile, trying to keep the crackle of damage from his voice. "My captain sent me to check your security roster. I'm sure nothing's amiss, but protocol is protocol."

As he'd expected, the guard nods seriously. "Of course, Sergeant. Lucas Meijer, sir, *stadwatch* trainee, second year."

Kaz withdraws and consults a list of names, which is really just a parchment on which he had Jordan write down one of her class rosters. He draws a sharp line through a miscellaneous name. "There you are. Can you start lining up the others by this entrance for me?"

A sharp nod. "Yes, sir."

"You'll make a fine officer one day, Lucas." Kaz tips his cap, and the boy beams and lets him in.

If only every building in the city was guarded like that. He'd be even richer, though a damn sight more bored.

Inside, the embassy seems to be a web of hallways emanating from the building's center. Kaz bypasses the offices and cuts as directly as he can through to the center of the spiral. There's only one entrance to the lobby from inside the building, and one from the outside, where most of the security force is concentrated. One hand on his baton, Kaz steps up to the doorway in between two more embassy guards, once again showing his badge and repeating the story he told to Lucas.

The guards glance at each other, and instantly Kaz knows that these two will be the ones to give him trouble. It's unsurprising; the veterans will be the ones stationed closest to the prize. He asks for their names, then checks his list and frowns deeply.

“That’s strange. Perhaps this one is a misprint.”

The shorter and more well-muscled of the two guards pushes forward. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t see either of your names here. Spell them for me?”

Kaz raises an eyebrow as each of the guards dutifully spell their names out—Boris Smits and Reuben de Lange—then takes more time than he strictly needs to drawing his pen down the list. “I’m afraid I have neither of your names here.”

The shorter one, Boris, steps around to look at the list with his brow furrowed. It does, technically, have neither of their names on it.

“I’m sure this is some sort of mistake,” Kaz says placatingly, in the tired way of a working man who has better places to be, “but I don’t want to be the the reason our relations with Fjerda go to hell, so you understand I have to detain you for now.”

“Like hell you will.” The other guard is nearly Kaz’s own age, and he crosses his arms now, remaining in place. “I’ve been in this job a year now, Boris for two. They’ve got my name down for pay in the offices. Both of us.”

“The offices will be the first place I check,” Kaz says, unhooking the cuffs from his belt. He is not, in fact, planning to give any attention to the offices. “I’d rather not do things this way, you know, Reuben.”

“Same here, *sergeant,* ” says de Lange, taking a step back, reaching for his cudgel. “I’d like to talk to your captain.”

“You can when I drag your ass back to the Zelver district holding cells,” Kaz says, all sense of friendly weariness gone. “Both of you. Impostors.” This room is far from ideal for a rifle, but he makes sure they can both see it.

One of the officers from outside walks up to the three of them. “What seems to be the problem, Sergeant? Does the Zelver chief think we can’t handle our own business here?”

“He knows it’s on the city’s worth of us if this bauble goes missing,” Kaz says irritably, taking a step away from the two embassy guards. “I wish I was having tea with my wife more than you do, but I’m up for promotion next month.”

“You want to be the one keeping your thankless officers from their firesides,” the officer says bitterly, shaking his head with a chuckle. “Sadist enough to be a captain. So what’s the matter with those two?”

“They’re not on my list,” says Kaz, knowing this is the point things get difficult. If anyone else in the room compares personnel records with his false ones, it won’t be hard to tell that something is off. But, as he has discovered, a man who speaks loudly and wears a nice coat can bluster past most obstacles, particularly when he also has a gun. “Have you noticed anything about them? I’m sure you have.” He nods to the other officers stationed outside,

who have remained there. “You’ve got the best eye here, it seems. I’m sure you’d know a fake if you saw one.”

The officer strokes his bristly chin. Kaz watches his eyes, which is how he knows the moment the bait has been taken. It really is a shame that there aren’t any witnesses to laugh about this. “Now that you mention it, they do seem to forget an awful lot. Might be making it up as they go.” The officer whirls on Smits and de Lange. “The game is up. I’ve got two good eyes and two better pairs of cuffs.”

“I certainly won’t insist on wasting mine,” Kaz says with a chuckle. “Keep those good eyes on them, Officer. The tall one looks slippery.”

Wallet, watch. The magician makes a grand gesture while palming the coin in his other hand. Control their eyes and anything is possible.

Other than the two remaining *stadwatch* grunts, currently bracketing the door with their backs to the windows, the other guards have been summoned to the back door for a personnel check that he’s debating not actually performing. The lobby is broad and floored with marbled white tile, with benches built from some kind of silvery Fjerdan wood—not ash, of course—and a receptionist’s desk with a flag strung above it, tidy to the point of being barren. In the center of the room is an ornate case of glass, silver, and the same heavy wood, housing the glittering circlet on a velvet pillow—of all things.

Paint a target on the damn thing while you’re at it.

The case, as advertised, has no locks; frankly, the Council and general Kerch press have been making it seem as if the security is more important than the circlet itself. The case would have to be broken to be opened, they claim, or otherwise lifted from the bottom, which would require the strength of at least four men even if it wasn’t bolted to the floor.

However, as he explained to Inej and Jordan, for that to be true would be impractical for the embassy. The circlet will need maintenance during its plush stay in Ketterdam, and they’re not going to shatter the case or haul in a moving crew every time they can’t quite see their reflections in it. There must be another way.

The Ravkan embassy had a false floor concealing a secret room beneath. Kaz doesn’t know for certain that all of the embassies do, but given the Ketterdam penchant for illusions, it’s a bet he’s willing to make. He limps in a circle around the silvery wood case, listening to his own footsteps, then moves further out into the room. Even through the thick white tile, there’s a distinct difference in hollowness.

There you are.

Kaz eyes the Fjerdan flag hung behind the desk again. It sits beside the door to enter the room, which, if he recalls correctly, leads from a hallway with a solid wall where that corner would imply empty space. He slips behind the desk and shifts the flag aside, tracing his fingers along the wall to feel for a seam.

There. There's a slight break in the texture of the wall. Kaz presses inward, looking over his shoulder once at the officers outside— *still facing the street* —and the hidden door gives, admitting him to a narrow shaft with a ladder leading down.

The ceiling underneath the false floor is low enough that Kaz can't quite stand up straight, which makes moving around awkward, not to mention painful. He maneuvers the rifle off of his back and sets it at the base of the ladder. The room is dim but not entirely dark; at first, he can't decipher where the light is coming from, until he spots a roughly-cut square hole in the ceiling.

He goes to stand directly under it, and he was correct—he's standing beneath the case, where the velvet pillow holding the circlet is suspended with fine silver chains. The trick here is, of course, that he can't see through the windows to be certain the *stadwatch* officers outside aren't looking, but that doesn't matter if he can keep himself from being seen. He flicks one side of the velvet pillow, tipping it just enough that the circlet slides off the edge and drops into his waiting hand.

He looks down at it critically. It's just another piece of jewelry. Without the national heritage, it would be worth less than most stolen paintings. But the key is that much noise was made about the security around it, and now yet another famous system has been bested by Kaz Brekker.

Kaz is reminded of Van Eck's remark in Hoede's office, some two decades ago now. *Just to prove he could.*

It will be interesting to see if the current Council shares Van Eck's suspicions. Though he didn't give Jesper the satisfaction of agreeing that this likely was a trap for thieves, Kaz does happen to think that's exactly what it was—a trap for one thief in particular.

The one who, some half a bell later, is walking alongside the Almhentcanal with Princess Astrid's circlet snug in his pocket.

Chapter End Notes

the setup for this heist was inspired by the gardner museum heist, which you should totally look up and go down a rabbit hole about.

Jordan

Chapter Summary

Jordan has her turn to graduate, but the night is shadowed by bad news.

Chapter Notes

welcome to all the new friends who've picked up this fic recently, especially those of you who've gotten in touch on tumblr! I love you all and it's about time for some shout-outs~

maiden_of_crows, I love your collection of disorganized thoughts very very much <3

thephonyqueenofengland, nobody expects jewelry theft…that's the trick of it. *vaguely kazzy music plays*

MurderousWritingClub, I'm a little scared of your reading speed but mostly in awe.

Lunarmoo, kanej communicating through glances will always be my favorite micro-trope.

fitzsavorycracker, as it happens, your favorites are some of my favorites too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is really just the beginning of the next part, Jordan knows. The part where she has less help and a lot less forgiveness.

That's not to say she isn't excited; in fact, she'd like to think there's more excitement fueling the trembling of her hands than nerves, which either way is shaking her certificate back and forth and making the thick paper go *wub wub wub* as it bends. Sort of like her heartbeat, actually. She would really like to not be standing with her class anymore; more specifically, she would like to sprint into the crowd, find Alby, and properly tackle him.

Then she's going to shove her fancy gold-embossed paper in his face. *Certified Medik*, it says (*level one, apprentice*). And she's going to get a license (sort of—again, level one, apprentice), which is one whole fancy paper more than Alby has. This delights her more than it probably should. After all this, of course, she's going to move the diploma out of the way so that she can put her face where it was and kiss him soundly, but that's a given.

Currently, however, she is listening to the tail end of a speech that really should've been at the start of the ceremony. She's almost certain none of the graduates are listening now, as they jostle each other and whisper and crane their necks to search for familiar faces in the crowd.

Jordan, for her part, doesn't have many faces to search for. Inej is up in the rafters of the gymnasium somewhere, and Kaz couldn't easily attend a graduation without the entire thing being shut down for fear of a Dregs attack. Not to mention, Jordan considers, the crowd. It would be much easier for him these days, but there are certain risks her da hesitates to take.

She wishes he wouldn't choose the ones he does take. She wishes he took fewer risks, in general. But that makes her a big hypocrite and she knows it.

Still, can't she be bitter? At least a little bit? Being bitter is so much easier than being afraid.

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The speech does eventually end, as all things do, and after the tackling and diploma-shoving and soundly kissing that she planned, Jordan is now approaching Speaker's Bridge, arm in arm with Alby. She can see the compact silhouette of her mama standing at the railing; as for Jesper and Wylan, they bundled her off the stage in a storm of crushing hugs and claps on the shoulder and are now making their own way to dinner. Jordan wishes they could all walk together, but Saints know that's not going to happen. Not here, at least. Not now.

She jogs the last few steps to Inej, dragging Alby with one arm and waving with the other. "Mama!"

She sees Inej turn, and a glowing smile melts across her face, golden as butter. "Hello, *me vranika."*

Alby grins, removing his arm from Jordan's to drape it over her shoulders. "She calls you 'little crow'?"

Jordan stops walking to stare at him, making him stumble. She isn't so little now; in fact, she turned nineteen barely a month ago. But that isn't what surprised her. "You understood that?"

"Oh—" Alby ruffles his hair with his free hand. "I, erm. Sometimes when I'm not busy I'll go to the library, and they have books on Suli. I was—curious. But I only know a few words. I'm awful with the grammar."

Jordan is beaming up at him. She can't help it. His eyes are stone-green in this light, illuminated almost from within under the strong glow of the streetlamps, but mostly they're beautiful because they're his. The beauty is in the knowing. Jordan knows how those eyes smile. She sees pieces of it every time she watches his face, and sometimes she even sees the smile come together. "I love you," she whispers, nudging her shoulder into him.

Alby blushes fast and vivid. They've said it before, but she could swear he does this every time. "I love you too. *Ljubavi*."

His accent is clumsy, but Jordan feels as if her heart might explode regardless. He figured it out.

Alby, however, is not the only person requiring her attention tonight; Inej is still waiting halfway across the bridge, and when they meet her, her smile is a bit too knowing for Jordan's taste. Jordan scowls. Inej just looks more amused at this.

"Are you ready? Clever graduate?" Inej opens her arms to Jordan, who allows herself to be separated from Alby and pulled into a swift hug.

"I am," she says. "Being smart makes you hungry, you know."

Inej laughs softly. "Don't tell your father that. He'll take twice as much dessert."

She starts off, and Jordan and Alby follow, but they've barely stepped off the bridge onto the cobbles before she glances back over her shoulder and frowns. "Mama—why are we going this way? The manor is back past the Grijs, that coffeehouse." There must be a reason. If Jordan could traverse the city with her eyes shut, Inej could do it fast asleep and probably walking on her hands. She wouldn't just get lost or go the wrong way. Jordan watches her expectantly.

"So it is," says Inej, and there's a glitter in her dark eyes that brings up a well-conditioned excitement in Jordan. That look means trouble of the best kind—the kind they get to cause.

"So—where are we going?" says Alby, who is not well-trained enough to recognize the trouble smile.

"Shhh." Jordan takes him by the arm again. "The fun part is the finding out."

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Jordan thinks she started holding her breath when they crossed into the Zelver district. If she didn't start then, she certainly did when they turned onto the street housing numbers Six through Twenty-six. By the time they pass Eleven, then Twelve, she is barely moving at all for fear of scaring her hope away. But then they're standing in front of the blue door, in front of the window boxes with the first early blooms of geraniums, and Alby is there, holding her hand.

"Really? Really?" Jordan whirls to look at Inej, resisting the urge to bounce up and down.

Her mama is already starting up the stairs. "Welcome home, Dr. Rietveld."

"I'm not really—I think I have to do my apprenticeship before you can—hey, wait for me!" Jordan scrambles up the steps after her, once again dragging Alby along.

His feet and mind seem to be equally slow-moving as they walk inside. "This is your house?"

Jordan forgives him on account of the whole night being one surprise after another. "Yep. Our nest."

Alby chuckles softly, having paused two steps into the sitting room, looking around as if he's afraid to touch anything. "Your family really likes crows. Is that because of the Dregs?"

The tattoo she still doesn't have. Jordan is less sore about it now. It would have made university training complicated, and she'd likely have had to wear her sleeves long the whole time. "Mostly," she says slowly, "but on the other hand, I think the Dregs like crows because of my da."

Alby walks over to the piano, but he doesn't play it; he just looks down at they keys. "Because they like to steal shiny things?"

"Because they don't ask so many questions." Kaz appears in the doorway to the kitchen, leaning on one side of the frame, black eyes intent on Alby. "They also remember humans who've been kind. Who leave them gifts and tend their young and don't take advantage when they're wounded."

"And they let the kind ones closer to their nests?" Alby asks, raising an eyebrow, turning to fully face Kaz and the kitchen door.

"I've never been kind enough to know." Kaz shifts his focus. "Jordan, watch the door. Jesper and the merchling are late enough now that they should arrive soon." Not wasting any more time—as if he ever does—he disappears back into the kitchen, where Inej says something soft and unintelligible that is mostly drowned out by the hiss of a pan.

Alby glances back at her.

Jordan shrugs. "He's never been kind enough to know," she repeats, smirking slightly.

Even as she grins, something constricts her chest; she doesn't want to lose this. It's so precious, in a way she never understood before. She doesn't want to lose the lace curtains in the windows, the first slight scent of skillet bread as it bakes, her parents' voices too soft to understand, the crack and flutter of the hearth. She doesn't want to lose the arguments with Inej when she forgets to water the window boxes, or the afternoons spent bothering Kaz in his office until he snaps at her and goes to the Slat instead. She doesn't want to lose their rough and untuned voices swapping shanties and Kerch folk songs, her da clumsily trying to pick out Suli dances on the piano from the piecework of hers and Inej's recollections. She doesn't want to lose the way they all love each other too much to say it, too much to look it in the face.

It's easier to be bitter than to be afraid and she can't do it. The scene tonight tastes of too much sweetness, and she is so full of fear.

When she looks again, Alby is no longer by the piano, and in the next second his arms are around her. Jordan turns and presses her face into his chest. His hands slide up to cradle her shoulder blades, achingly gentle. She wants him to squeeze her to the breaking point, to make her feel something other than this tenderness that's tender like a bruise.

I've never been kind enough to know. Her da who hugs her on the bad days and makes hot chocolate when it rains and let Pekka Rollins' son into their house is a liar.

“How much has he told you?” Jordan asks almost in a whisper, as if saying it quietly enough will allow her to pretend she never actually said the words, that none of this is real.

She feels Alby pause, despite the fact that he isn’t strictly moving. “Told me about what?”

They’re in dangerous waters now, infested with secrets instead of sharks. But he has survived the house, so maybe she can push a little further. “I don’t know how much more time you need for blood draws or whatever you two are doing, but...”

“Oh. That.”

“That,” Jordan murmurs, shutting her eyes against his chest.

“Just that it’s happening,” Alby says. “Exactly what he hasn’t told me, and exactly when…no one seems to know.”

Jordan holds him tighter. There are too many words in her head and none of them go together. Alby starts rubbing circles between her shoulders.

“Is being smart still making you hungry?” he asks in her ear.

Jordan smiles weakly up at him. “I think it is.”

Dinner, at least, is wonderful; skillet bread (with a few less-spiced pieces for Alby and Kaz) alongside some kind of game bird that has Jordan’s mouth too full to ask questions about what it is exactly. They set out glasses of green tea with ice and table wine. Jordan checks her pocket watch.

“It isn’t that long of a walk,” she says, glancing through the doorway to the front room.

Inej rises, a slight frown nested between her brows. “It isn’t,” she agrees, setting down her cup. “Perhaps I should—”

Whatever scouting mission she may be planning, it is immediately proven unnecessary by Jesper blustering through the door, followed shortly by his husband, a piece of paper wrinkled in one hand.

“This is late even for you,” Jordan comments, cracking a grin, but it slides off her face when she sees the worried expressions they share.

“Saints,” Inej breathes. “Already?”

“Rapid are the wheels of justice,” Kaz says drily, finally lifting his head. He takes an infuriatingly calm sip from his glass. “But only when we would rather they weren’t.”

“It won’t be a joke when you see the charges,” says Wylan, passing what appears to be a WANTED poster over to Jesper. “It isn’t just that they’ve caught you with the circlet. This won’t be as simple as staging a prison murder. They’re out for blood, Kaz.”

“Circlet?” Alby asks blankly. Apparently this is the part he wasn’t privy to, but Kaz has yet to throw him out of the room, so Jordan assumes he’s allowed to overhear.

“They want you alive,” Jesper says, his grey eyes overcast. “So the city can watch them kill you.”

Chapter End Notes

shout-out to google, croatian, romanian, and hindi for the frankensuffix that is my version of a Suli diminutive (-ika, in this case).

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Alby asks a question.

Chapter Notes

hello hello friends! I don't have any announcements to make today, really, so let's jump straight into your shout-outs~

thestarsinoureyes, nooo, keep reading at work. confuse your coworkers. convert them.

GNM_dreaming_girl, fascinating that you mentioned the embassy being Fjerdan soil. that's an excellent point.

jzmn8r, the constant question of an soc fan…how *is* kaz going to get out of this one?

Heiress_Kyr, you know me—I had to give you some soft family vibes in the midst of all this plot drama.

MurderousWritingClub, apparently kaz being hard to kill just encourages them to keep trying.

cameliawrites, jordan and alby admittedly have a special place in my heart <3

lusxnei, she's all grown up!

Lunarmoo, I fear kaz's spice tolerance is a lost cause by now.

RipplingReader, I'm very excited to share the ending with you!

Pipperdoo, the triumphant return!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They want you alive. So the city can watch them kill you.

"I can't pretend I'm the only showman in Ketterdam," says Kaz, holding out a gloved hand for the poster, which has a crude, smirking depiction of him on it.

“That’s if anyone manages to recognize you from that,” says Jordan, making a brave attempt at a smile. She acts like Jesper in these moments, unsteady, giggly, unable to bear the weight of being serious.

Kaz sets the poster face-down on the table and leans back in his chair, folding his hands placidly in front of him. “What is it besides the circlet?” His black eyes sweep over the other occupants of the room, as if any of them might have the answer.

The mistakes, the holes he left in the heist, were subtle enough to be real—to the point that he did worry they wouldn’t be recognized at all. The poor excuse for an alias, Casper Baas; the edge of the Dregs tattoo poking out from his sleeve at the right angle; the uneven bent to his gait; letting himself be seen on the browboats; the velvet pillow out of place just so. He’d cut his exit close enough that the stadwatch officers stationed outside likely spotted him in the last seconds as he left the embassy, perhaps even saw the glint as he’d slipped the circlet into his coat pocket.

From there, he’d predicted that they would get a warrant to search the Slat before starting a proper manhunt, so he’d planted doctored records in the less-hidden parts of his office and left a used knife in the false bottom of an unlocked drawer. Truth be told, he’d forgotten it was stashed there and chose to simply let it be.

While Kuwei’s auction might have counted for treason, it had so many strings attached that exposing it is hardly worth his time. But the Council and the stadwatch will gladly tear out the thorn in their side for much less.

“Murder,” Wylan says grimly.

Kaz raises an eyebrow. “Which one?”

“Some poor sod named Martien Lansink. And the case is colder than a Drüskelle’s ass. Seventeen years old, if you can believe it,” says Jesper.

Lansink must be one of those whose names he never learned. Seventeen years ago, however, was right around the time Jordan came to them. “What do we know about him?” Kaz asks, his eyes landing on Inej now. And what can we find out? His lips curve imperceptibly; she is wearing the face that she uses to prepare for battle, all hard-set lines and proud dark eyes. She nods once, holding his gaze.

“Nothing yet,” says Wylan, folding his arms. “But everyone here who’s in the business of saying prayers should pray that you know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Kaz smiles humorlessly at him. “Don’t I always?”

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Tension shimmers in the air like heat after this interruption, but Jesper, Wylan, and Jordan carry on a brave sally of conversation regardless. Kaz, for his part, finds his way back to the piano, lowering himself down slowly since there are no witnesses and his knee has been aching all night.

It's a dangerous game to let Wylan hear him play; he'll likely start in on Kaz about it and they'll be here for hours. But he needs to think, and picking out the verses of a plain folk song seems to be the way to do it.

He knew this would be a possibility, that the Council would want to make an example of him. Jan van Eck was the most unpredictable member of their ranks, and with that position now occupied by his son, the rest of them have very few surprises to offer. He could adapt the original idea and have himself appear to be murdered in the holding cell, but the question is if they'd believe it. In addition, in order for him to be believed dead and not just escaped, his body would need to be found, and he doesn't like leaving what they'll do with it up to chance. Besides, Inej will object to that level of uncertainty. He can almost hear her—*How would we know where to find you? How would we know that we will find you at all?*

The melody stumbles and trips over itself, which sounds like a foible on the composer's part but is just due to his lackluster skills. Wylan's voice rises from the kitchen—"Triplet, not a trill."

Kaz raises an eyebrow and a middle finger, despite the fact that the merchling very much cannot see him. He can hear Jordan laughing. That's good, at least.

As he tries to remember how the ending line goes, he becomes aware of a presence standing near him. Not Inej—he knows when it's Inej. There is a warmth to her that he instinctively wants to turn towards. Now, however, he is perfectly content looking at the keys.

"How—how are you feeling?" Alby asks stiltedly.

Kaz fixes him with a flat, if not withering look. "And I thought Jordan was the medik." It doesn't make a difference to his response, but he does wonder if this is in reference to the experiments or the expensive threat to his life that they've just discovered.

"She is, but I'm the one running the highly experimental drug trials that you're a key part of, at least until you're otherwise occupied in a *stadwatch* holding cell." Alby shrugs one shoulder. He has gotten bolder over the years in a way that remains uncanny, but every time Kaz doesn't scatter his brains across the floor is just more encouragement for it.

Alby's expectant look does very little to encourage him. But he remembers why he's doing this; it's foolish and the numbers don't work in practice, and yet he can't shake the feeling that with firepox gone, the world would have more Jordies and fewer of what he's become. So he's—"Fine." *All of my blood is where it belongs except what you've got in some glass tubes.* Just because he feels irritable, Kaz strikes a clashing chord and hears dishes clatter with someone's surprise in the kitchen.

Alby doesn't exactly look pleased, but he lets up, which is good enough. His displeasure makes no difference to the Bastard of the Barrel.

"Is that all?" Kaz asks, playing through a snatch of the verse in just his right hand, going much faster than the song is meant to be.

"You're rushing," Wylan's voice floats in.

“And you’re not my tutor, merchling,” Kaz retorts, his voice a low scrape. He plays it again, faster, just because he can. An instrument is not so different from a lock; it responds to dexterity, the right pressure, and once you know how to take it apart, you can make it do anything you like.

He becomes aware that Alby is still standing there, rocking from foot to foot. Finally, the young man speaks up. “Can I—I wasn’t planning to do this just yet but with, well, everything I should probably—could I talk to you and Inej? Just for a minute.” His Kaelish accent creeps in when he’s uneasy, Kaz notes, and he starts talking faster.

Kaz fixes him with a look just long enough to make Alby slightly nervous. Or, slightly more nervous. Finally, he nods once and tips his head towards the kitchen. “But you’ll have to ask her yourself.”

Alby returns to the table, presumably to repeat some version of this exchange with Inej. Jordan’s voice rises in a brief note of question that seems brushed aside by Alby’s response.

What is it he has to say that Jordan can’t hear? Instantly Kaz’s guard rises. Was he wrong to let Rollins’ son into their house? Has he been too open, too uncautious?

But then Inej and Alby emerge, and his gaze flickers up to meet hers, and she looks intrigued but unafraid. Kaz trusts this. He trusts her.

He has to return the vows she made him, after all. *I trust you*.

Kaz jerks his head towards the stairs. “My office.”

Frankly, he’d rather Inej and Alby go ahead so that they’re not watching his every step, but he’ll be damned if he lets Alby Rollins lead him around in his own house, so he grits his teeth and plods up the stairs with steps as even as he can manage. They’re not as steep as at the Slat, but the throbbing in his knee has flared to life by the time they reach the second floor regardless.

Not bothering to look behind him, Kaz keeps going down the hall, each step punctuated by the heavy fall of his cane, and unceremoniously sits behind the low bookcase that doubles as a desk. Jordan’s painting from when she was younger is still there, framed, facing the wall.

When Inej enters, Kaz moves his hand so that she can perch on top of the desk, which she does. Alby stands uncomfortably in the middle of the room.

“Well?” Kaz says.

Alby nods as if to reassure himself. “I had something to ask you. Both of you. It was going to wait but I—” He looks at Kaz uncomfortably before rushing on. “I don’t know how many more chances I’ll get.”

It’s strange what Alby is afraid of and what he isn’t. Everyone in this room is aware of the danger that is approaching, Kaz himself most of all. He has no reason to bludgeon Alby for mentioning it.

“Go on,” says Inej, her head tilted to one side.

Finish the story, Kaz mentally inserts.

“I know it’s a bit old-fashioned,” Alby hedges, hands clasped behind his back—Kaz sees his arm twitch as he fidgets—“But I wanted to—to get your permission. To ask Jordan,” he exhales, “to marry me.”

Kaz can only see a sliver of Inej’s face from the side, but he can imagine her expression—jet brows arched, lips slightly parted, eyes intent. “To marry you?” she repeats, as if to make sure Alby is certain he meant to say it.

His jaw sets. “Yes. Not until she finishes her apprenticeship at least, but—yes.”

Kaz studies the boy in front of him, tall in his secondhand scholar’s buttoned shirt and polished shoes courtesy of his merchant benefactors, not wearing a stitch of green. His eyes, however, are as green as the front of his father’s gambling halls. Alby is old enough now to have grown into his resemblances. His nose, his ears, must be from whatever mistress carried and birthed him. But he has the broad shoulders of a rock breaker and enforcer, the strong jaw, and most of all the shape of those eyes, that makes an old instinctive rage lift its head in Kaz. Like having your knee struck and watching it kick up.

But he let this boy into his house. He let this boy alone with his daughter. He let this boy get near him with needles and study the faded scars on his face. He let this boy get near him at all.

“You could never be a crow,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting almost imperceptibly.

What little color there is vanishes from Alby’s face. “What do you mean?”

The smirk expands just slightly. “You’re far too polite.”

Alby laughs in a way that sounds more like a high-strung sigh of relief.

Inej holds up a hand as if to quiet them, drawing the attention in the room unassumingly to herself. For once, Kaz is unsure what she’s going to do.

“What is her favorite flower?” Inej says.

Alby blinks, evidently surprised, but he recovers fast. “Daffodils. They grow around her birthday and sort of look like trumpets.”

Inej nods consideringly. “Her favorite sweet?”

“The hard colorful ones that they sell in those pigeon-trap general stores,” Alby says promptly, having apparently caught on to the game. “The one-*kruge* bags. I don’t—I don’t remember if they have another name,” he adds, looking between the two of them as if this will cause their refusal to slam down and crush him.

In truth, Kaz generally sees asking the parents' blessing to propose as a needless ritual; it's not as if they own the girl in question. He would just as soon leave it up to Jordan to say yes or not. But he sees what Alby is doing; Alby knows enough to be aware of the complications involved here, and he's trying to make himself trustworthy. Now Kaz has to decide if he's willing to be won over by it.

But Inej has another question first. Folding her hands neatly in her lap, she asks, "What is her favorite song?"

Alby looks to the side, at nothing in particular, as if the answer floats there in the ether. Then he nods slowly. "It was a Suli song—um—" He clears his throat and his voice deepens slightly as he attempts the title. "*Zheji ka vjetra*. She said it was one you sing to her. We were sitting by the Boeksplein and the sun was out, so she was falling asleep." There's a softness, a distance to his smile that would be so easy to exploit; he might as well paint a target on his chest. But Kaz suspects that Alby knows and doesn't care.

He also has to wonder how closely that look is mirrored on his own face when he turns his eyes to Inej. She is smiling openly now, suddenly vibrant as a hearth when before her warmth was twilight. Home to the Suli is people, she has told him. And though for most of his life this has been his city, as he prepares to leave it Kaz knows—she is home to him.

"My papa would have loved you," she says, rising suddenly from the desk and clasping Alby's hands. She only comes up to his shoulder, and yet her presence carries an understated greater strength.

"I'm sorry I never got to meet him," Alby says, again recovering fast, and Kaz is surprised to hear the earnestness in his tone. "Is—" Alby glances over her shoulder at Kaz. "Is that a yes?"

"That will be up to Jordan," Kaz says.

"To whom someone will have to explain this conversation," Inej points out.

Despite the fact that his answer is technically still uncertain, Alby is alight with relief. "I can make something up. Oh—" and he sobers again "—There was one other thing. But…it was really just for…um, it's about the trials." He makes uncertain eye contact with Kaz.

It is comforting to know that Alby Rollins is a terrible liar. He's sure Inej has also noticed, but she releases Alby anyway. "I'll speak to Jordan," she says, and slips out the door.

Kaz watches her go before turning his attention back to Alby. "Now," he says, "What did you really want to ask me?" Habitually, he realizes, he's talking slowly, at a menacing crawl like he does in interrogations. A better man would let up, but Kaz is not a better man, and it's terribly satisfying to watch the boy in front of him sweat.

To his credit, Alby doesn't entirely crumble. "I…we haven't really talked about it, me and Jordan, I mean, but…assuming she says yes, I'd like to take her last name. Which I realize is also yours."

Kaz stares at him, knowing he must look as if he's trying to dissect Alby with his eyes. There's no trick or trap to this. Alby doesn't have that in him. No, Kaz has not forgotten standing behind the Crow and Cup with the Thorn at their mercy, Alby letting the assassin live, but he'd built his expectations on a wrong assumption then. Now he knows better.

The tattoo on his bicep feels as if it's burning. This boy was supposed to be Pekka Rollins' legacy, the thing he built that outlasted even his empire. The Kaelish Prince to the King of the Barrel, heir to a palace of emeralds and lies. But that empire is dead and gone, Alby with nothing left to rule, Pekka Rollins going mad with paranoia in the countryside, and all that remains of that hoped-for legacy is his name. Which his son is willingly giving up.

Is this it? Is this Kaz's true vengeance? The version of Jordie that haunted his thoughts since that first night in the harbor had insisted he get even, that nothing else would be enough. But maybe the boy that his brother really was, now that Kaz is letting himself remember, would prefer this—his story being told. Firepox being cured. His name carrying on.

Pekka Rollins may never remember his brother's name, but there are many others who now will. All because Kaz told them. He told them about the boy who made one wrong choice too many. The one who gave up the last warmth in his body for his little brother to live. The one who was neither savior nor failure but just a child.

Alby Rietveld. With that, the last of Pekka Rollins' legacy is gone. With that, Jordie Rietveld leaves behind something lasting.

"I don't entirely know what my father did," says Alby, "and I'm not going to ask. But—whatever it is, I don't want to carry it anymore."

"Then don't," says Kaz Brekker, Kaz Rietveld, the man of many names. "Call yourself what you like. But be certain before you choose a new name. You can only die so many times."

Alby smiles grimly and starts for the office door. "If I may—you ought to take your own advice, sir."

And then Kaz is alone in the office, disliking the aftertaste of being called sir. Then he is alone in the office, alone with the knowledge that he can only die so many times.

But after everything, what's once more?

Chapter End Notes

The name of the song Alby mentions translates to "Daughter of the Wind," and it's the lullaby that Inej has sung to Jordan once or twice in this fic. The Suli title comes courtesy of canon Suli, Hindi, and Croatian.

Inej/Kaz

Chapter Summary

Inej visits Kaz in hiding, but so does someone much less welcome.

Chapter Notes

hello hello, friends! this chapter comes to you courtesy of shower thoughts and walking thoughts, both of which are surprisingly effective. but of course, before we get into that, you must have your shout-outs~

maiden_of_crows, I definitely see the baz krekker resemblance. “baas” just means “boss,” uncreatively on my part and kaz’s.

Pipperdoo, you might want some water to chase that drywall with. or perhaps a soothing tea.

thephonyqueenofengland, it really is typical kaz behavior to set up a fake failure as a whole rube goldberg machine red herring…thing

MurderousWritingClub, pekka has *actually* lost his son this time, and of course it’s his own stupid fault.

RipplingReader, legacy is a concept that I think changes a lot for the crows over time (kaz especially). for himself he wants nothing to do with it, but for jordie…that’s a different story.

Heiress_Kyr, things are getting very interesting indeed! I’m so hype you don’t even knowwwwww

GNM_dreaming_girl, I will pass the message (threat?) along to him.

Lunarmoo, one day I’ll write a “missing scene” from this fic that’s just kaz and wylan arguing over the piano

Lusxnei, thank you so much!! <3

Feylin17, kaz can be exceptionally petty sometimes, even if not especially where pianos are involved.

jzmn8r, it’s a murder mystery (not really, the mystery is solved in this chapter)

WordsMatter, we've definitely done a bit of time skipping, but even with that, it'll be a few years before alby actually proposes. he just wanted to ask now because, well….

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four days after the reward is posted, Inej goes to the storehouse with answers.

The Warehouse District, an impenetrable maze of concrete obelisks, is the ideal place to hide behind monotony; to be found is no easy feat when the buildings all look the same. This, however, is an obstacle barely worth noticing for the Wraith. She locates the thin, shadowed alley that houses the storehouse's secret door among its cousins, then steps carefully to find the loose brick in the street. From what she understands, it has actually taken a bit of bribe and blackmail to keep that stone from being replaced—of course the city would choose the most inconvenient times and places to actually repair its streets.

From there, she counts six bricks up and pushes in the sixth, revealing the panel in the wall which slides neatly away to grant her entrance. She and Kaz used to meet here, in the years when she was coming back and forth to the city with Jordan. When they were barely a family yet. When she didn't know if they ever would be. How strange those times seem now, like someone else's life viewed through a long glass.

She is silent in the dark, but Kaz looks up at her approach anyway. He is sitting on a crate across the mostly-empty space from her, his bad leg stretched out and the other bent to rest his elbow on it, no diversions in sight, his eyes jet and serious. There is little evidence in the storehouse that he's been here much longer than she has, let alone several days; no empty buckets, no packets of rations, no crumpled or disturbed blankets. It's too easy for Kaz to starve himself of comfort, she thinks. But that's why they're doing this.

"What business?" he says, and the abraded grind of his voice is more pronounced than usual, as if from disuse.

Perhaps if they were other people, there would be no business at all. If they were other people, she could just be a woman visiting her husband, chastising him for having not shaved, kissing him gently and swiftly and bringing him something to eat. Instead, she has the same gift as always—information.

She has to wonder what she will do in the country. Are they making a terrible mistake? Will they both be bored to madness? Will peace be the one thing they can't survive?

Inej almost tells him to stop this. To go home, erase the evidence, save himself at the last chime of the bell like she knows he can. But the wheels of this great and awful machine of a scheme have already been moving for too long—it is too late. The time to run is gone.

Is this how they fight their way out together, like he promised? Will peace be a victory? Will a kind life turn out to be what they've been fighting for, or will it be hollow, with too much room for regrets to echo?

Partially, Inej must blame herself. This she knows. She told Kaz that she was tired of sharing him—with his past, with his work. She asked him to lay it down, to live for her. She told Kaz that he now had too many reasons to live to use his life as if it's someone else's coin. And what is he doing but listening?

They'll both take the fall if she's wrong.

"Martien Lansink," Inej says. Being distracted will only make matters worse.

Kaz sits up a bit straighter, jostling his cane where it lays across his lap. Some of the shadows on his face shift in the changing light, but others still betray that he has neither slept nor shaved. "What have you found?"

"He was a blacksmith from a town south of Belendt," Inej replies, walking closer, taking him in as she approaches. In the sunlight that filters in dusty shafts from the high windows, he sits there in shirtsleeves and bare hands, his ring glinting as her view of him shifts, the line of his shoulders sharp with weariness even though it shows nowhere else. "He tried to make his fortune in Ketterdam as a killer for hire, but the only fortune he found was the bad sort. He was hired to target you."

She watches Kaz's face for recognition and sees it when the pits of his eyes deepen. "He didn't know where to hit," Kaz says, nodding once.

"And you kept the knife?" she questions. She's standing right in front of him now, looking up to meet his eyes; the crate is nearly as high as her shoulder, but that doesn't stop her from vaulting onto it and crouching beside Kaz.

"It was well-made," he replies, in that tone that makes an old infuriation itch under her skin; as if this answer is obvious, as if anyone could have thought of it. And yet there's a strange comfort in the annoyance. The assurance that some things never change.

"How did I not know about this?" Inej wonders. It isn't, admittedly, as if she keeps tabs on every one of his kills, or worries herself sick over every upstart who tries to threaten Dirtyhands; she'd never sleep if she tried that. But a hired blade is a different matter. It strikes her as something she would have heard of, even seventeen years ago.

Kaz is silent at first. One would think that a long silence means more time to dilute the truth, but with him it tends to be a distilling process. Looking up towards the window, into the muted light, he says at last, "It was just before you first arrived with Jordan."

Inej's breath snags in her chest and she is unsure why. This is no great revelation, exactly. In fact, the great irony of it is that of all Kaz's kills, this one could be so easily refuted by self-defense. It would be so easy to fight, to erase, to live and terrorize the city another day. But he won't, and she won't tell him to.

Get out of the war, she said. *What's left? What are you fighting for anymore?*

Neither of them could answer it. This is not surrender. This is not retreat. This is accepting a victory long past. If all goes as it should, they might finally see peacetime.

“How long do you expect it’ll take them to find you?” Inej asks, withdrawing a hip flask of rum from the inside of her vest and passing it to him. This is what they do. They focus on the mission. It’s comfortable. It’s running on limited time.

“Old habits, Captain?” Kaz says with a raised eyebrow, the first sign of levity that she’s seen on his face in days. Still, he drinks from it, and though Inej might be imagining, she thinks some color comes back into his face. “Within another day. Even the *stadwatch* can’t take too terribly long when they’re given an address.”

“Don’t have so much faith,” Inej says drily, taking the flask back from him and swallowing some herself. Even years after Fionn was gone, she’d kept buying the kind that the Kaelish girl liked, even though it was too sweet for Inej’s own liking.

“Strange words coming from you, Sankta.”

“I am not holy, Kaz, and neither is the *stadwatch*,” Inej tells him with a stern look. “But at least I make my myth worth believing. I am afraid they hardly try.”

“We’ll find out soon,” Kaz says wryly, his gaze distant again.

They are both quiet for a moment, the paths of their thoughts diverging, Inej assumes, but then she speaks what has truly been pricking at her. “I was unsure you’d ever leave Ketterdam.”

Kaz looks back at her, and as serious as he has been this whole time, there’s a strange calm about him. She is used to seeing him tense with focus in the middle of a job, or lost in schemes, but he is eerily present now. “I thought you wanted me to.”

Now it’s Inej’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “That has never been enough to force your hand.”

“You’d be surprised.” The answer comes fast, without the hesitance that she’s used to when it comes to Kaz and soul-baring truths. He’s even looking at her, his black eyes locked on hers with no edge of discomfort. She’s afraid to like it.

“So you would leave behind your city, your gang, your home, your kingdom—because I asked you to?” She knows he would, and she knows that’s why he doesn’t answer; but if it were just that, Kaz would be miserably bored and displaced, and if it were just that, she’d never have wanted him to do it.

For another moment or several, which Inej counts by beats of her piecework heart, Kaz remains unspeaking. He stares ahead into a patch of nothing somewhere in front of the door. The light from above catches him sideways, makes him look unreal and almost illusory, a thing made out of mist. Like what they say she is. “You’ve heard the eulogy of Kaz Rietveld,” he says slowly, “the birth of the bastard.”

“All of the stories,” Inej replies, watching him. “Even yours.”

“But he is the man who married you. Who adopted Jordan. Dead men have no families, but neither do Barrel boys.” He nods slowly, as if this reasoning is being given to him by

someone else, as if agreeing with his own philosophy. “He must have become something new again. Something alive. Something with a vested interest in staying that way.” Kaz looks sideways at her, softened by the dim, and Inej thinks of the letter: *You’ve seen it every time you meet my eyes.*

“Of course it was for you,” he says, in that obvious tone again, but how can she bring herself to be annoyed?

He has been different, since the trip to Lij. It’s not that Inej missed it. It’s not even that she hasn’t cared to ask.

Build something new. Watch it burn. Kaz built an empire, and this will be the burning.

“What happened at the farmhouse?” she asks, in the same voice she used to ask *What happened to you?*, almost two decades ago now.

“Enough,” Kaz says, and passes her the flask.

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After some hours sitting by his side, talking about nothing and lapsing into quiet, Inej disappears. Kaz knows he could watch for the moment she does it, try to see where she goes, but he lets it be magic this time.

The high, small windows are squares of gray, fog-thick Ketterdam dusk, and the evening is waning when he realizes he knows. It’s about to happen.

When they break in the door—no appreciation for the subtleties of a secret panel—he is standing in front of the crate, gloves back in place, hands folded over the head of his cane. His sleeves remain rolled up, Dregs tattoo flashing bare, but his coat is perched capelike on his shoulders, his hair severely pushed back, his face shadowed from the high and fading light by the brim of his hat. It’s Dirtyhands they’ve come for, so it’s Dirtyhands they’ll meet.

“Kaz Brekker.” The man in front is narrow-faced and white-haired, pale enough that he looks like a daugerrotype in starched black. In fact, the only bit of color he wears is an amber oak branch pin shining subtly on the band of his hat.

Ah. That is a house crest that Kaz knows. Well—he knows all of them, but this one particularly well.

He stares down the group, mercher backed by *stadwatch* officers and grunts in uniform. “I’d say guilty as charged, but that would make your job a bit too easy, wouldn’t it, de Vries?”

“No need,” says de Vries, his voice brittle with age. His arrogance is really astonishing when Kaz could snap each of his bones like that twig on his family crest. “We have all that we need on you, Brekker.”

“Do you?” Kaz gives him an indulgent, patronizing smile. He wonders if de Vries knows who’s to blame for the loss of his indenture, Orlov. “Well done you, de Vries. You’ve managed what the Merchant Council in near thirty years never could, which by my count is

less time than you've been on it. And all on your own, I'm sure. You would never stoop to spend this city's sacred *kruge* on the Bastard of the Barrel when you could catch him with your own wits."

"I could shoot your tongue out, Brekker," says the gruff, heavy-jawed *stadwatch* sergeant standing behind de Vries. His men do, indeed, look antsy with their guns and cudgels, but most people in Ketterdam look at Kaz that way.

"Let's not start making threats, Sergeant," says Kaz, shifting his grip on his cane. "Mine are far more creative and I'd hate to outdo you."

"Like hell you would," the sergeant replied. "Shoot him or cuff him, boys, at this point I don't much care which."

Either of those is a fate Kaz finds himself quite likely to escape, but instead of fighting or disappearing out a window, he keeps them talking. "Who sold me out?" he demands, and it doesn't take much to let the oil-black gleam of Dirtyhands bleed into his stare, ready to ignite. He clocks the shift in their demeanors and knows he's done it.

"What good will it do you? There is no revenge to be found in a prison cell or a grave, Mr. Brekker," says de Vries, as if he's schooling a stubborn child.

Kaz smiles emptily, letting the flame burn low. "Perhaps for a man like you," he says, his voice soft, almost musical despite the thrum of damage in it. "But you've heard the stories, haven't you, de Vries?"

There are ten officers with guns pointing at him, jittery and drawn, and yet here Kaz stands, whole and hearty and speaking in the hypnotic croon that has kept him alive by instilling as much curiosity as fear. *What is he going to do next?*, they wonder. And so they let him live a little longer.

"I am the shadows between the bars," he says, black gaze roving over the assembled men. "I am the void in the keyhole. My hands are stained with the grave dirt I crawled from." He flexes one gloved hand. "Who can say? They could all be true or all be myth. Take your chance. See for yourself."

He watches the sergeant's hand for a twitch, a signal to fire, but the sergeant is watching de Vries with his jaw clenched. *Ah*, Kaz notes. *He answers to de Vries*. He can't do anything until the merch says so. It must be tearing the sergeant apart to wait on an old man who has never been decisive in his life.

"You're just a man," the merch dismisses. "We could fire now and you'd be dead as any other."

Kaz tilts his head to one side, fixing the black-clad merchant with a pitying stare. Despite this mock show of sympathy, however, his smile is cruel as a scythe. "You have no idea what I am, de Vries."

With parodic grandiosity, he lays his cane out on the ground in front of him, spreading his hands wide in a magician's gesture, a grand bow—*Nothing in this hand, nothing in that hand, nothing up my sleeve*. His audience is captive as he straightens up—

And offers out his wrists.

"Far be it from me," says the low, humming rasp of Dirtyhands, eyes smoldering, "to keep you from finding out."

Chapter End Notes

bonus points if you remember who martien lansink might be

and oooo who sold kaz out

Inej/Jesper/Inej

Chapter Summary

As the days wind down, the Crows remember old promises: No mourners, no funerals.

Chapter Notes

I almost put a final chapter count in place of the "?" on this chapter, if that tells you anything about how close we are to the end. now, before ados are in any way furthered, it's time for shout-outs~

GNM_dreaming_girl, we do love our magician ;)

Lunarmoo, I'm glad you've enjoyed making predictions with this story arc :)

sofia_volkov, I'm so happy that you liked that quote!

jzmn8r, you will have at least one of those questions answered in this chapter~

Lusxnei6, kaz really is an edgelord, lol

MurderousWritingClub, congrats on your correct guess about our assassin-turned-victim!

WordsMatter, I hope you continue to like reading the details, because I love writing them lol

The_ghost_writes, this fandom has been a wonderful gift to me too <3

RipplingReader, I hope you have some mind left to lose over this one XD

Heiress_Kyr, the next update has arrived!

One Week Until

Kaz is convicted, of course. When the news arrived within only a few weeks, following a farce that should never have counted as a trial, Inej scorned the Kerch legal system and swore so scathingly in Suli that Jordan looked impressed. Of course they could take a year or more to bother even sending slavers to trial, but the Bastard of the Barrel had to be set on the fastest track that Kerch justice has ever seen.

With the conviction comes an execution sentence and date. Firing squad. And the day is fast approaching.

He'd had no chance of bail; it was a miracle enough for the Council and *stadwatch* alike that they'd managed to capture and keep him, and they had no intent of letting him buy his own, if temporary, freedom. Saints know he could afford it. Thirteen Zelverstraat is modest enough, only given minor upgrades over the years—repairs and small comforts—but Inej has seen their vaults. Not to mention that the Crow Club and the Silver Six are each at least four times the size of any other gambling hall on the Staves.

He's being kept in solitary in Hellgate's old tower now, behind a solid iron door with a single slit, watched by four guards outside the door and six more in the passageway leading to the rest of the tower. They have been given strict instructions, from Inej's understanding, to not speak to him; at least the Council has gotten wise to the power of Dirtyhands' words alone.

As if any of this could stop the Wraith. She will see him whether they wish her to or no.

She sits now in the one of the manor's firelit parlors, poring over blueprints of the old tower that she lifted from the city planners' archives. Wylan stands beside her chair, looking over her shoulder at the prints, arms folded; Ria is on the floor across from her, cross-legged, studying a map that Wylan sketched of the buildings around the Exchange, and Alby sits on a chair near her, bouncing his knee. The only one absent is Jordan, working on her apprenticeship—well. Not the only one.

The scene would almost be comforting, Inej thinks ruefully, if it weren't for the circumstances.

"I doubt even you can get in through that slit in the door, so maybe we should go at it from another angle," Wylan suggests. "They're not doing the Hellshow anymore, so no releasing the animals this time…"

Alby winces.

"Why not just take out the guards?" Ria suggests without looking up from the map.

"Too much mess," Inej muses. "They'll wonder why he's still in the cell with ten men dead outside."

"What if—" Wylan begins, but he's cut off by Jesper loping in from the entrance hall, holding a small locked box, dressed in tangerine paisley and stripes.

"You've got mail, sunshine," he says, and he's grinning, but is tone is a bit more subdued than Inej is used to. "This just came in from de Vries."

Wylan puts out a hand for the box and, accepting it, puts in the code and pops it open; Inej sees a purple flash of *kruge*, stacks of it, before Wylan closes the box again. The reward, she realizes. Five hundred thousand. Five times what the Council had priced Kaz at when they were in hiding on Black Veil. "Alby," Wylan says, looking up.

“Yes?” Alby shifts his attention away from Ria and the trajectories she’s measuring between rooftops. Seeing the significant look that Wylan is giving him, he stands up quickly and walks over to stand by Wylan and Inej.

Wylan hands him the box.

Alby blinks, confused. It’s almost amusing, to see that hesitant teenage expression on the man’s stature that he has grown into. “Do you want me to put it in your office…?”

“No. I want you and Jordan to keep it.” Wylan folds his hands as if to show that he’s not taking the money back.

“But it’s—that’s—” Alby looks at Inej as if she had anything to do with this. She tilts her head slightly to the side, managing a smile at him despite the circumstances. Alby is a good-hearted boy, despite his father and his losses. In that way, she can understand why Wylan has taken such a particular liking to him. There must be some familiarity in it, a red-haired prodigal son pulled into a makeshift family by a risk-happy beacon of adventure.

Wylan just nods encouragingly.

Alby swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Thank you,” he says, clutching the box close to his chest. “Thank you. For everything.”

Jesper joins them in only a few long strides and loops an arm around Alby’s shoulders. “Of course,” he says. He flashes a white-toothed grin. “How could we not keep you around when you enable so much of our experimenting? The amount of new beakers we’ve acquired alone is—”

“What he means to say,” Wylan cuts in, “is that you’ll always have a home here if you want it.”

Inej sees the tremble of oncoming tears in Alby’s expression and averts her eyes back to the blueprints; this is not something she is meant to see. She has her own family, one that is counting on her still. And yet, she can’t pretend not to hear the slight crush of fabric and watery laughs as Jesper and Wylan pull Alby into a tight hug.

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Three Days Until

Getting Inej into the cell is one thing—drop down from the ceiling, lift the guard’s key, slip into the cell and stay quiet behind the iron door. Getting Jesper in, given that he has no skill for crawling on ceilings or generally being quiet, is another trick altogether.

No doubt Kaz would have come up with this scheme ages ago, but eventually between Jesper, Inej, and Wylan—with bits of inspiration from Alby and Jordan—they craft a plan which, generally, amounts to Wylan once again pulling strings. Given that he is not only a Councilman, but the one who turned Kaz in, it’s relatively straightforward for him to get his

husband a visitor pass to Hellgate's old tower under the guise of, essentially, wanting to gloat. Jesper doesn't bother asking why they think that particular act is one he'll be able to pull off.

A firing squad. Saints. It really could have been anything else. Hanging would have been easier to fake. Even some Grisha invention or injection—they could replace that, or mess up its mechanics, or steal it and replace it with one that doesn't work. But no; in the square of the Exchange, three days from now, five gunmen will be the starring performers in the death of Dirtyhands.

Or, apparent death. If this goes off like it's supposed to. And if it's going to succeed, Jesper has to talk to Kaz about his part in the plan, so to Hellgate he goes.

Perks of being a trophy husband, he thinks, flashing his pass and a bright smile at the guards watching the entrance to the old tower. They scrutinize it, pass it back and forth, and then one of them pockets it and motions up the stairs.

He's leaving his post? Jesper wonders, but the guard is almost immediately replaced by another, who seems to materialize from the hallway into the more modern part of the prison.

They walk up the stairs in relative silence; Jesper is itching for something to grab onto, something to do with his hands, but he couldn't bring his guns in and he can't mess with any metal scraps without the guard noticing. He settles for drumming on his hips instead, occasionally making popping noises to echo the sounds of their footsteps on the stone.

The thick scent of mildew goes stronger as they climb, and Jesper glances sideways at the guard. "Are you looking for tenants? Wy and I were thinking about getting a vacation home."

The man doesn't laugh. It's almost like he's talking to Kaz already, Jesper thinks with a bizarre hint of fondness.

With all the procedure and seriousness, he's almost surprised that they haven't blindfolded him, but he's making no effort to memorize the maze of passageways anyway. Hopefully he'll have an escort on the way out, too. They pass the nicer cells that used to house fighters from the Hellshow, and Jesper wonders if Jan Van Eck managed to sweet-talk his way into one of those during his stint here.

"This way," the guard says gruffly, herding him towards a hall that winds deeper into the tower. It's darker here, and there are no longer bars on the doors, which have also grown smaller. The guard withdraws a bonelight and holds it up as they walk, until the hall opens up into a slightly wider dead end with a single iron door. Six guards line the hallway, and two on each side bracket the door. The space is dim and torchlit and smells heavily of damp.

The guard walking with him shows Jesper's visitor pass to the others. "Mr. Van Eck," one of them says, inclining his head and stepping aside. Jesper allows it, even though being called that makes his skin crawl. He and Wylan use both last names in more casual company, or just the same ones they were born with, occasionally even Hendriks among friends. But it's Wy's family name that got him in here, so it wouldn't be smart to deny it now.

One of the guards unlocks the door, and the others cluster behind him, hands on weapons. All this for an unarmed Kaz. Jesper supposes he's not surprised. They would guard a five hundred thousand *kruge* jewel or painting like this, so why not a five hundred thousand *kruge* man?

His escort hands him what looks like some kind of flare. "Strike that if he tries anything," the guard says. "We'll see it through the door."

Privately, Jesper isn't sure they'd get there in time or he'd be able to light the flare at all if Kaz really *did* want to kill him, but he accepts it anyway and steps inside.

The cell is even darker than the room outside, with a single bonelight mounted on the wall near the ceiling, and it takes a moment for his eyes to adjust. Once they do, Jesper can make out the shape of Kaz sitting in the corner, dressed in prisoner gray wool that doesn't look warm enough for the chill of the tower, his face ghostly under the bonelight.

"You look terrible," Jesper comments, his eyebrows raising. In all fairness, it's true; Kaz has never eaten well anyway, but he looks particularly hollow and ashen in this light.

"And you look like pea soup if it was sold at Sten's." Kaz's rasp sounds eerily similar to the scrape of the iron door when it had been opened.

Jesper goes to sit beside Kaz on the dusty ground, his skin pricking in the few places it's exposed to the air. Maybe he should have worn a heavier coat, but he didn't have one in the right (lovely!) shade of green to match his waistcoat. If Kaz is bothered by the cold, of course, he doesn't show it; the man could probably be crushed in a printing press and still making acerbic comments.

Jesper, on the other hand, is in perfectly good shape and still can't think of anything to say. What is there to talk about besides the last thing that he wants on his mind? He reaches for something else, anything else. He remembers now how he felt in those early years—starved after excitement and risk, chasing every dangerous thing he could find, inevitably including Ketterdam's most dangerous boy. He's older and wiser and yet he still watches closely, still wishes he understood.

"That morning. Inej will need to get you onto a roof," Kaz says abruptly. "Find one of the ones that was too close for Ria. How much of a line of sight do you need to Fabrikate?"

"If I start with one I don't have to keep it," Jesper says, blinking in surprise. "But—on a roof? I thought you'd want me to swap out with one of the shooters, or something."

Kaz shakes his head. "No. They'll be checking personnel too closely. And you'd be too focused on your own bullet." He's got his bad leg stretched out and his hand goes to massage the knee. He doesn't have his gloves, which doesn't surprise Jesper, but his wedding band is gone, too. Maybe Kaz hid it somewhere before the stadwatch came for him. It's strange that the absence of the ring is so jarring where the absence of the gloves isn't anymore.

"Much as I focus on anything," Jesper says with a slight laugh, shifting his weight back and forth.

Then Kaz's eyes are fixed on him, chips of black glass, and he knows he can't get around this anymore. He's going to have to face what looms in front of them. If Kaz can stare down five gunmen—and he will—Jesper can at least face the concept head-on. Wylan's voice plays in his head. *Breathe. Good. Now, another.*

He knows what Kaz wants him to do.

"You can't redirect the bullets entirely," Kaz says. "Visuals and blood bags won't be enough. They'll want to be certain they've killed me. Just don't let anything go too deep."

That's what I've always been good at, Jesper thinks contritely. But he knows what this really is. It's how Inej must have felt before the Ice Court—*no can you do this?*, no *try your best*, no backup plan. Just six stories in the dark and Kaz's unwavering belief that it was possible. It's why they all ran into countless suicide missions on his orders. It almost feels like trust.

"All right," he says. "I'll do it."

Kaz doesn't reply exactly, but his affirmative nod says *of course you will, I knew you would*. And again Jesper feels lost. That's all there is to say about the plan. He could talk about how Jordan and Inej are doing. He could tell Kaz that the reward is safely in Alby's hands. He could tell a story about that feral cat stealing socks from his drawer. But the words won't come.

In their place there's just a rising panic, the realization he'd been trying to fight down: *I might never see you again*. And Kaz is looking at him like he knows it.

"Time's about up," one of the guards calls from outside.

Something in Jesper's chest constricts. This is the moment he used to run out and find a hand of cards or a body or a bottle to lose himself in. But right now, it's just him and Kaz in this cell, with too many promises to keep and too many reasons to regret breaking them. Too little time left.

"So," Jesper says, swallowing the thickness that's risen up in his throat. "Three days."

Kaz isn't looking at him anymore. His eyes are lost somewhere in the distance. "Three days."

"Mr. Van Eck, you all right in there?" The voice comes again from outside and shocks Jesper into urgency, the need to do something drastic and final. But what is there? What's left, after…everything?

He bursts to his feet and then stands there, hovering, lost. All he can think of to say, and it comes out pleading, is—"Kaz, what if this doesn't work?"

Kaz is so eerily, infuriatingly calm as he, too, rises to stand, his eyes never once leaving Jesper's face, making Jesper feel wildly out of his depth again, as if Kaz knows things about him that he'll only ever be able to guess at. "You know what to do," he rasps. "We've been telling each other long enough."

No mourners. No funerals.

It's a wish for good luck, to the gambler with a streak of bad hands. And it's a set of orders—don't mourn for him. But Jesper knows that if this goes wrong, he will.

He lets out a sharp breath to try and keep his eyes from watering, which only sort of works. "Saints, Kaz, can I *please*—" He puts his arms sort of up and out, as if that finishes the question. It doesn't, not really, but…

Katz's jaw sets. He swallows and steels himself. Then, though the movement is small, he turns his shoulders slightly outwards, arms moving a bit further from his sides.

And. He nods. The motion is barely more than a shiver, but it's there.

Jesper has to fight not to fling himself at his best friend; instead, as if Kaz is a feral animal who'll be scared off by any sudden movements, he goes slow. He moves in until he's within reach, then the first brush of contact, then his arms are around Kaz and finally, Jesper's hugging him.

He expects it to stop there. But one nimble, suddenly unsteady, notably bare hand comes up to rest on his back. And then the other.

They take a few breaths in silence. Jesper is trying not to jitter out of his skin. Kaz is—a little tense, no doubt, but he's strong enough that it's clear no one is forcing him to hold on.

"It was always harder with you," he says stiltedly, his voice rough and rueful somewhere near Jesper's ear.

"What? Why?" He knows what Kaz is referring to, and has come to understand their fight in the clock tower much better, but that doesn't explain—

The answer comes quiet, but steady, not at all rushed. "Because you're my brother, Jes."

Well. If he wasn't tearing up before, he is now. Jesper tries to blink away the tears and only succeeds in letting one roll down his face. "*Shit*, Kaz," he chokes out, tightening his arms around his best friend—his brother.

In the years since the Ice Court, he's learned who Jordie was. He knows bits and pieces of what happened to him, that he was a boy who took too great of a risk, that some things about Jesper himself just hit too close to home. He and Kaz have managed handshakes, the occasional clap on the shoulder, casual brushes, proximity. But this is—he wasn't sure they'd ever get this far.

It was always harder with you.

"Can you do me a favor and not die?" Jesper says with a shaky laugh, lifting one hand off of Kaz's back to scrub it across his eyes.

His bastard brother steps back, his stance strangely relaxed, expression belying something like a challenge. "That's largely up to you now, isn't it?"

Maybe, Jesper considers, this is what Kaz's trust looks like.

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One Day Until

Inej shuts the door soundlessly and pockets the stolen key. Her eyes find Kaz in the corner of the cell, standing as if somehow he knew she was there. He probably did. He always does.

Night has fallen outside. Within the prison, the air is bitter and the pale light wavers as if they're underwater. In the morning, they'll bring him across the harbor to the Exchange. And she'll watch.

She does not kiss him. She doesn't go and take him into her arms. She stands at a distance and watches and tries to adjust to the feeling.

She can't think of anything to say but what she has said before. "I can help you."

She wishes he'd take the offer. They could leave this place. They could fight their way out together like he promised. But she knows Kaz never would, not this late in the game, and so she doesn't ask.

He might say yes to me. But she won't ask it of him. This is the price of peace.

A slight smile twists his lips. "Can you, now?"

Inej can feel herself standing straighter, performing for no one, a ghost with a crown of roses. "Tell me how." She already knows her part. And yet she tries to bargain with him. Maybe they can make a deal where she gives anything Kaz wants in exchange for him to be safe.

"Take the cane and the gloves," he says, his gaze intent on her face, a terrible gentleness in it. "Burn them on a funeral pyre. Burn as much as you can down with it."

Inej nods in silence and she watches. Kaz is dressed in ash-colored prison garb, his hands and feet bare. It's the same way that he was when she first touched him on the roof of the Ice Court. She'd been preparing herself to slip back into her golden-caged nightmare, and neither of them had really expected to see the other side of the job.

The Kaz standing before her now is the same boy who trembled beneath her palm in the bitter Fjerdan air. He is the same Kaz who walked with her through the thick sheaves of grass outside a Ravkan farmhouse and worked at her father's side. He is the one who called her my piety, my wisdom, who found her on the steps of the Van Eck manor to stop her from making the greatest mistake of her life, who did not hold her through the bleak first night she slept at his side, but cradled her with his eyes and whispered to her the names of her Saints.

Don't get ideas, he said. *I'm naming your knives. Remember you are dangerous, Inej.*

He is the same man who invented love on her skin and made a prayer of it in the secret of their room, who lay beside her the last morning in their home and did not touch her because, for the first time in ages, she couldn't bear it.

"The name I gave wasn't real enough," he says now. "Not for you."

Is Kaz Brekker your real name?

Real enough.

“Saints, Kaz, you’re remembering that *now*?” she asks. He smiles at her, a smile that simply slides onto his face, as if it was never anything but easy.

“My real name is Kaz Rietveld.”

There’s something lodged in her throat. Perhaps it’s her heart trying to find its way. “I know.” She steps closer and gently cups his face, and Kaz is still beneath her touch with ease, even leaning slightly into it.

Inej’s thumb moves over his cheekbone, the place where his freckles will come in if they ever make it to the sun-soaked fields of Lij.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Inej blinks the blur from her eyes. Her voice is fragile when she speaks. “For what?”

Kaz’s eyes find hers. They’re as deep as the harbor. “For saying I could replace you before the Ice Court job. For a thousand other things after.” His hand covers hers and gently folds around it, lifting it away from his face.

He’s teaching me to let go, Inej thinks.

“If this plan falls apart,” he says, squeezing her hand once, “I’m sorry for that too.”

Inej feels a tear slip down her cheek. She raises her chin and lets the tear fall with the posture of a queen. "No mourners, Kaz."

She will mourn for him. But Kaz holds her gaze and lets her lie.

He releases her hand. "No funerals."

Jesper

Chapter Summary

Jesper fights for his brother’s life.

Chapter Notes

Shout-outs have arrived~

Heiress_Kyr, I have a LOT of feelings about the kaz-jesper dynamic and how their personal growth affects and improves it.

maiden_of_crows, not the "yet" jsbfsiuhgsiuhsf

MurderousWritingClub, I do get a kind of joy from making you all nervous, lol.

Birdyyy1, I am sorry to you and the bus but also immensely flattered.

GNM_dreaming_girl, "ready enough" is an excellent way to put it.

WordsMatter, I appreciate the kudos dearly <3

shieldmaiden19, our favorite feral genius isn't out of tricks just yet...

jzmn8r, I probably deserve the therapy bill lol

thestarsinoureyes, it will be tricky to write from solitary in Hellgate, but I'll do my best XD

Lusxnei6, I can hardly believe it myself, tbh.

thephonyqueenofengland, it wouldn't be me if I didn't serve you a found family-angst cocktail every once in a while.

Viva_La_Bohemia, I laughed when I saw you call this a book and...then I looked at the word count. oops.

RipplingReader, I really would apologize for the tears but uh....I'm not sure how sincere it would be XD

Lunarmoo, my faithful noticer of details, back at it again <3

pjreads2, how dare work interrupt your feral sleep-deprived fanfic binging??

As the sunrise flares red above the harbor, they row him across from Terrenjel.

The harbor is dark and choppy, and city smoke hangs low over the water as the distant procession of boats gets larger on the horizon. Jesper stands at Wylan's shoulder in a crowd of merchers, merchant wives, and miscellaneous spectators on the stone wall above the quay. Alby is with them too, their respectable ward, nameless and dressed in proper black; Jesper can see the nerves in his expression, in the width of his green eyes, but he doesn't blame the kid. He feels it too.

Sailors jostle and grumble as they work around the commotion, but most of them seem curious nonetheless. The scream of the gulls sounds louder than usual. It's bitterly early, and Jesper only slept the past night in fits and starts, but he's not any more tired now than he was when he was trying to sleep. Anticipation is crawling like fleas over his skin and his hands keep flexing, twitching.

The specks of the smallboats come into clarity as they get closer. There's three of them—two with two Hellgate guards and one *stadwatch* officer each flanking the boat in the center, which contains the other six guards, a *stadwatch* captain, and Kaz. His hands have been shackled into what look like metal cups, which cover them completely and are, to Jesper's knowledge, usually reserved for Grisha prisoners. He should probably be surprised that Kaz Brekker with his hands free is considered as dangerous as a Grisha, but disconcertingly, it makes sense. Kaz isn't blindfolded, and even at this distance, his black stare cuts through the morning haze.

"Clear," the captain barks when they reach the docks, and the crowd shuffles back, an uneven, rippling shift emanating out from the center. Jesper pulls Wylan back against his chest and grasps Alby's shoulder before they get knocked into or stepped on by the people around them. Then the whole entourage—officers, guards, and Kaz—step out onto the docks, in a laborious process that involves surrounding him and pulling him up by the arms. Jesper watches Kaz's face for any sign of discomfort, but if he's feeling any, it's well hidden; his expression is a deadly blank.

It's not a long walk from the docks to the canal, where they'll drag Kaz onto a flatboat to the Exchange, but Jesper and Wylan will have to let him out of their sights for that part—the Councilmen all have private *gondels* and will be taking the leisurely route there. They'd never be seen too close to a condemned criminal.

Jesper wonders what they'd consider "too close". He thinks of Kaz's hands carefully cupping his shoulders, the tense way he opened his arms. *Because you're my brother, Jes.*

He keeps these memories close as he follows Wylan and Alby's bobbing red heads down to the side of the canal. He'll need them later.

The Van Eck *gondel* is more heavily guarded than the others, which strikes Jesper as the same kind of stupidity as a pigeon checking his pocket as he walks down the Staves. He knows that the idea is to protect Wylan if Kaz does get wise to who turned him in (which is

almost funny, given that the whole thing was Kaz's idea), but to him it seems to telegraph that there's reason for Wylan to be a target in the first place.

Of course, there's nothing to be done about it now, so they board the *gondel* with a delegation of house guards and *stadwatch* and make for the Exchange. Jesper gets that itchy feeling again while Kaz is out of his sight, and he knows Kaz would hate that—he's never liked having hands wrung over him—but he can't help it. There are a thousand things that have to go right today, and if any one of them goes wrong, the rest will fall too.

They disembark, and the crowd seems to have swollen as they walk to the Exchange. In the middle of the square is a three-sided scaffold, padded—to absorb ricochets, Jesper realizes, his stomach suddenly feeling terribly heavy. And blood.

The reality of everything slams into him like a prairie cyclone. There's no sidestepping this. No distraction to be had. He wants to crawl out of his skin.

Speaking of crawling—Jesper eyes the rooftops around the open square, but they're empty of a familiar inkblot figure.

"Where's Inej?" he hisses. There's no way he's getting onto a roof without her. Actually, now he's starting to wonder how he's going to get up there at all. He can't leave Alby, Wylan, and the rest of the Council without a decent excuse. And if they're at ground level, if he can't get a good line of sight—

He shines when things are going to hell in a handbasket, Jesper reminds himself. Admittedly, it doesn't clear his head as much as it once did, but his head also doesn't need as much clearing these days.

"Setting up her part," Wylan replies, quiet and purposefully vague.

He may not be Kaz, but Jesper isn't so bad at scheming in tight moments. "Sunshine, can you do your best whiny merchling act for me?"

"I have a feeling I've still got strings left to pull." Wylan's hand finds his in the crush of the moving crowd, the guards surrounding them. "What for?"

"He's got to get up high," Alby murmurs. "Right?"

"Look at you, paying attention," Jesper says with a brief grin. He's tempted to tack on a nickname, something like *lion cub*, but that would probably touch a sore nerve.

Wylan breaks away from him for a moment and weaves through the other slow-moving spectators, followed by a handful of slightly panicked house guards, to one of the *stadwatch* officers among the assembly. Jesper can't hear much of the conversation, but he makes out snatches of words and phrases: "—Would really feel safer if—", "—distance—", "—can understand that I'd like to be sure—". The captain's response looks affirmative, but he won't know until Wylan rejoins them.

"That looked good," Alby says nervously.

“Only one way to find out,” Jesper mutters in reply.

Wylan shoulders his way back to them, looking—not displeased, at least. “They’re doing to redirect us in a moment,” he said. “The Councilmen will be—”

He’s cut off by a muddled shout of orders from the presiding *stadwatch*, which is accompanied by the splitting of the Councilmen and civilians. Jesper sincerely hopes that the people in front can hear the directions more clearly than those in back, because he has no idea where they’re being led.

Once they enter one of the offices that ring the Exchange and start for the stairs, however, it makes sense: The balcony. The balconies will be empty of messengers and flags today, making them the perfect place to spectate the demise of Ketterdam’s greatest monster. For Jesper’s purposes, that suits him just fine.

Wylan herds him and Alby into the front row, where they stand against the railing and look down on the open square. Somewhere behind him, Willem de Vries is complaining about the lack of chairs. Jesper hopes that his ancient bones give out and he tips over the balcony.

There’s motion at the opposite entrance to the Exchange, and Jesper hears Wylan take in a surprised breath. He cuts off his vengeful thoughts about de Vries and glances over at his husband. “What—?”

“That will be the Fjerdan delegation,” Maurits Hembrecht puts in, his voice thin and whistling slightly. “They requested to attend, given that their embassy was the one violated.”

Bit of a strange way to describe it, Jesper thinks, as if Kaz had been drunkenly feeling up the embassy in some back alley, but he is quickly distracted by the sight of a familiar blond head near the front of the Fjerdan crowd.

Nina. Accompanied by her prince, it looks like. Her new face still takes some getting used to; it makes his brain stutter, like hearing Wylan’s voice come from Kuwei’s mouth once did. But he knows that walk, that proud uphold of her head. He watches her move through the square and suppresses a smile, hoping that she’ll see them.

“Why did no one tell me this?” Wylan asks sharply, giving Hembecht a look over his shoulder. “How many of the others were not told? Or was it just me, Maurits?”

“My sincere apologies,” Hembrecht replies, sounding entirely insincere. “We only received their missive last night. The post was nearly as slow-moving as the delegation themselves. It almost seems that they did not wish to give us time to refuse….”

Wylan ignores Hembrecht’s pointed tone and faces forward again, looking irritable but focused with that adorable set to his brows. It makes one curl in the center droop a bit lower on his forehead. “We have to tell Inej that she’s here,” he says softly.

“Who?” Alby asks.

Jesper can’t quite keep the grin back, despite everything. “An old friend.”

The milling rumble of the crowd has been slowly declining as the Fjerdans take their place on the balcony opposite, but it goes utterly silent as the northern entrance is darkened by Kaz and his escorts. Even from this far, Jesper can see the way he's listing left, keeping most of his weight off of his right side; he's not trying to hide the limp, even now. Maybe especially not now.

Jesper feels sick. Wylan's hand comes up to trace slow circles between his shoulders. "Breathe," he says quietly.

"Ghezen," Alby exhales hollowly. "They're actually going to do it."

Jesper would've said something sarcastic if he wasn't thinking the same thing himself.

He sees the *stadwatch* captain and two of the Hellgate guards half-drag Kaz to the scaffold, the others following close. He doesn't seem to be resisting, but they're rough and rushed with him anyway, and Jesper's knuckles go nearly white on the railing when they come close to dragging him off his feet, pitching him forward.

He could say damn the whole plan, he thinks wildly. Curve the bullets to put holes in every one of those officers and half the Council while he's at it.

Wylan's hand drops from his back to cover one of his fists on the rail. "I know. *Breathe*, Jes." And he's right, and Jesper knows he's right, but turning this into a shootout would be so much easier. He knows how to do that. He's more trained as a Grisha than he was during his time with the Dregs, but he's still not a terribly powerful one. At least being shot at would clear his thoughts. His head now feels like it's full of bees.

From the south entrance, five men march forward. They're not *stadwatch*, but Kerch navy in uniform, rifles strapped to their backs. They stand in a pyramid formation some yards away from the scaffold, from Kaz, his hands covered by those same shackles, his stance remarkably strong. It must be taking every ounce of effort in him, Jesper thinks, remembering again how Kaz fought to hold himself still when Jesper hugged him.

One of the captains approaches him with a bit of cloth that must be a blindfold. "No," says Kaz, and his voice is remarkably clear even at this distance. He looks up, black eyes surveying the assembled crowd, and Jesper tries to imagine how it must be to fire a rifle with *that* staring you down.

The people below shift and murmur—sailors on shore leave, civilians clinging to each other and preparing to hide their eyes, a surprising number of gaudy Barrel toughs, Dregs included. They're the ones making the most noise, stamping and yelling unintelligibly, shoving each other and being held back by the force of the presiding stadwatch. Jesper has a feeling they'd rush the scaffold if no one stopped them. But of course they would—they're Kaz's army, loyal to the last drop of blood, and he's not just their general anymore. Today he's under the hand of a coup. Today an empire ends. Today, Dirtyhands will die a king.

The captain with the blindfold retreats to stand behind the firing squad, pocketing the piece of fabric. "Very well," he says, and somehow his undamaged voice doesn't carry like Kaz's does. "Any final words, Mr. Brekker?"

Of course he'll have some, Jesper thinks, trying to shove down the lump in his throat. His brother will be making speeches as long as there's breath in his lungs.

"Yes, Captain Prenjer," Kaz says. "But of course." He manages to make his shackled state look as if his hands are comfortably clasped behind his back. Jesper notes that the captain flinches at the sound of his name. *Kaz wasn't supposed to know that*, he thinks with bittersweet satisfaction.

Kaz's posture turns open to the crowd, and Jesper sees his orator's mask slip on, the volume of his rasping voice raising to roll through the square of the Exchange. He wasn't there when Kaz took over the Dregs, but from the stories he can imagine it like this—Kaz untouched by everything thrown against him, in a state where he should've been broken but steady and cruel as ever, a scraping harmony in his voice that cannot be ignored or shut out, his stare pinning each member of the audience where they stand. It has a ritual grip, that cracked-stone voice, and no one can escape its snare.

Maybe he was an actor in another life. Maybe a preacher. But the complete bend Kaz holds over an audience is as hard-won as everything else about him, as ruthlessly taught and as bloodily gained.

"I have a word of advice for you," he says, looking up to the balcony, and for a moment Jesper could swear they lock eyes. "Businessman to businessman, if you will."

A slight grin hooks his mouth when the Councilmen shift and grumble at this.

"You paid for me. A ticket to the show. One hundred thousand *kruge* on every bullet. Say my business is murder. So is yours. So was poor dear Martien Lansink's." He turns at the shoulders and his smoldering coal stare roves over the watchers before him. "Open my vaults. Bring any urchin from under a bridge to mine and yours. Will they tell you what's honest pay and what isn't? Any merch, any one of you. Let's compare my blood money and yours and see who comes out cleaner." There's a sharpness of challenge about him, but no one rises to it, so he keeps talking.

"It's an affront to Ghezen to waste your time, *ja*? Time he wants as an offering? Then I'll advise you this." Now Kaz is still, terribly still, not a single twitch or tremor in him. He must be breathing, but Jesper understands in this moment why people believe he's more than a mortal man. "Don't bother with burials for me. Deep or shallow, Ketterdam's grave dirt was my cradle. You never want to see my face again? Burn me on the Reaper's Barge." He grins as if his teeth are stained with blood. "This is my city. I've paid her price a hundred times. She won't let me go easy."

He doesn't need to speak the threat that hums in an undertone beneath his words: *I'll be back.*

Jesper sure as hell hopes so.

"You've said your piece, Brekker," Prenjer snarls, striding forward to stand right behind the firing squad. He's a burly man, but he looks small when facing off with Kaz's bottomless, sharklike stare. "Since we're giving advice, I'd say your prayers now."

“I’ve never made a practice of it,” Kaz replies, amusement tilting his mouth. “But perhaps you should.”

The captain’s face purples. “Enough!” he bellows. “Men!”

The firing squad raise and cock their rifles. Jesper hears the click. He can feel the bullets, each one like the fingers on his own hands. He isn’t sure he’s remembering to breathe.

The countoff is silent, a raised hand, fingers dropping one at a time. By the time the captain makes a fist, Kaz will be—supposedly—dead. His thumb folds in. *One*.

Five bullets. Five rifles. Jesper pictures the diagrams he’s pored over with Jordan on the sitting room’s floor, critical organs, depth of flesh. Places where the veins flow shallow, places that bleed worse than others. Where not to let it hit and where to hit instead.

The captain puts down another finger. The gunmen adjust their aim. *Two*.

“Breathe,” Wylan murmurs from behind him, and Jesper does. He senses the rifles from butt to barrel, the wood of the stocks, the premonition of pressure on the triggers, the bullets through to their cores. There’s more—the pins and brass on the gunmens’ uniforms, even the soles of their shoes, but he blinds himself to everything but the rifles, narrowing focus. He needs a pinpoint. He needs something to hold to.

Another finger folds. Eyes squint into focus to aim. The air is sharp with the tang of shots not yet fired. *Three*.

He wonders how much Nina knows about the plan, if she knows what he’s trying to do. Will she be proud he got trained? What will she think if he fails? Has she seen them here at all?

One finger left. Kaz could be out on a stroll for how calm he seems. *Four*.

Alby is standing at Jesper’s side still, gripping the railing hard. What must he be thinking? What will Pekka Rollins do, if Kaz dies and he gets the news? Will he come back for his son? For what’s left of the rest of them?

But then the final finger closes down, and Jesper stops thinking of anything else. The captain shouts “Fire!”, the triggers pull, he feels each burst of gunpowder, Kaz’s voice in his head says *You’re my brother, Jes*, and then time slows down.

He’d swear it feels that way. Nothing is moving as fast as it should. The bullets are getting further from him, no longer extensions of his limbs but instead tied like strings to his fingertips. Jesper has never been one to use his hands like Nina or the other Grisha he’s seen, but he finds himself coiling back now, flexing his hand to slow the stampede of the bullets. It’s like trying to restrain a team of wild horses.

You’re my brother, Jes.

The bullets are fighting him. He can feel their paths trembling. The shots are ringing in his ears still. Some people in the crowd are recoiling. The furthest left bullet is slipping his grasp, he can feel it, driving toward Kaz’s chest.

You're my brother, Jes.

Jesper wonders if this is how his mother felt, using her power to save that girl's life. Knowing in that moment that *zowa* could be something good. Maybe Jesper will have to give himself up for it like she did, but there's peace in it, feeling his power like blood flow, like a heartbeat. In moments like this he can believe it's a blessing. *Do you understand now, little rabbit?* she whispers and yes, yes he does. He wishes she could've met Kaz. He'd have laughed himself to tears seeing that. Aditi would have another son.

You're my brother, Jes.

He might be a prairie boy, the one his mother called *little rabbit* for all the miles he could run, but now he's done running. Now he stands his ground. He focuses on the bullets to the sound of Kaz's voice in his ears, low and uncertain, and pulls back on them hard, everything in him straining at the seams. He's got them back in his grasp now and they're fighting, kicking back against the wrongness of being slowed down.

Jesper can relate. *Breathe*, he tells them like Wylan would. *Good. Another.*

The impact is growing close now. He can feel the fibers of the shirt where they're going to hit.

You're my brother, Jes.

Jesper clenches his hand so hard that his nails stab into his palm. He may not have Kaz's way with revenge, but if this city kills his brother, he will *learn*.

His fingernails are drawing blood. There's a roaring in his ears. The bullets are charging headlong but he's stronger.

And then they hit.

Time snaps back like a band drawn taut. Blood sprays. There's too much noise from the crowd to tell if Kaz grunts or swears, but he goes down hard. There aren't any ricochets that Jesper can see. Have any of the bullets gone too deep? He can't tell. Alby's looking away. Some of the wives are hiding their faces. Kaz twitches on the flagstones twice, then stills. Is he acting? Is this how it ends?

"Medik!" the captain calls out.

The medik in question was summoned on Wylan's request as part of the terms of negotiating the reward. Young, Suli, her hair braided down her back, she emerges from one of the offices and goes to kneel at her father's side. Jesper wonders if her hands are holding steady. He can't see from this far. Himself, he's shaking like a bird in a windstorm. The air smells like gunpowder.

Right now she'll be palming the syringe of Wylan's poison as she pretends to check Kaz's pulse, using her father's sleight of hand to falsely stop his heart. Jesper hopes Inej has prayed for them, that they won't need lightning strikes to awaken Kaz with no Zoya here to help

them. He hopes that the death is an illusion, that Jordan hasn't checked Kaz's pulse to find it silent. He can't tell from looking at her. It's eating him alive.

She stands up and looks around, just like Kaz did before making his speech. Kaz, who now lays in a terribly mortal heap on the flagstones, bleeding slowly.

The cloud cover that the sunrise promised has rolled in dark and angry, but for a moment Jordan's face is in the light, and Jesper wishes he knew the meaning of the shine in her deep-set eyes. He knows where she learned her mystery. The city holds its breath.

"Dead," she proclaims. It echoes.

Please be a lie, Jesper thinks, over and over, as if he could direct reality like the bullets. *Please be a lie.*

Nina

Chapter Summary

Nina plays her part. Inej gets revenge.

Chapter Notes

apologies for the late shout-outs and lack of tumblr post last week! I hit "post" and then immediately got in the car to drive for five hours, lol. last week's have been added to the chapter notes on 111, and this week's are here for you now~

Tess, I'm glad Jordan's appearance got to be a little surprise for you!

maiden_of_crows, this comment is amazing but especially the whole beginning bit. It means so much to me <33

Heiress_Kyr, wesper essentially adopting alby was inevitable and also kind of funny if you think about it.

MurderousWritingClub, "not literally, I'm not kaz" HELP

Lunarmoo, I'm so glad you liked the little echo in that section! that's something I've been planning for a long time <3

GNM_dreaming_girl, jordan is SO brave oml.

jzmn8r, oh but it *is* real heheheh

Lusxnei6, *hands tissue*

kazzle_dazzle7, I love my binge readers <3

sofia_volkov, the speechlessness is a high compliment since it means I've done my job hehe

thephonyqueenofengland, the pacing during tense scenes is SO REAL

shieldmaiden19, hopefully your distress is resolved...well, I don't know if it will be in this ch., but soon lol

RipplingReader, I should have put the "creator chose not to use archive warnings" just to scare people a little more lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Apparently Kaz's parting advice rang true; it is to the harbor that they cart his still frame, to row him out to the Reaper's Barge. It's strangely appropriate after all his past dramatics—*Ketterdam birthed me in the harbor, Barrel boys crawl out of the canals.* Nina reaches out and tries to sense him, or the absence of him, but there's nothing. No familiar murmur of death. *Good,* she thinks. If her power can't find Kaz, then he's alive. *Now stay that way, you stubborn canal rat.*

There are fewer spectators now. The death isn't nearly as exciting as the dying, Nina supposes. Those who remain are mostly government personnel, namely the Council and the Fjerdan delegation, plus a crowd of belligerent Dregs just inches away from a full-blown riot. Nina would like to say she doesn't understand the loyalty that Kaz inspires in his people; half the time, when they were working together, she did indeed want to strangle him. But she stayed, didn't she? He has never tried to conceal the kind of monster that he is. The kind that you felt could protect you when no one else would.

The sickboat looks like a toy between all of the berthed cargo ships, unstable on the choppy waves, the man rowing it grim and masked. It's almost absurd enough that she could forget it's real. Jordan helps the *stadwatch* officers and Hellgate guards carry Kaz down to the barge and Nina's heart lodges in her throat. Jordan is nearly grown now. How did that happen? *When* did it happen?

Nina knows that it's not as if she would have stayed, had things gone differently; she and Matthias were never going to remain in Kerch. But maybe she could have visited more often. Maybe a thousand things. Maybe it doesn't matter anymore. She has a job to do.

Saints. Back in this city for a few hours and I'm already turning all Kerch and practical.

Ilya keeps a hand on the small of her back, but it doesn't entirely quell the dread she can't explain, watching them lower Kaz onto the barge, empty but for him and the ferryman. *The bodymen don't bother to arrange them.* It's Matthias all over again.

No it isn't , she reminds herself sharply. *It's Kuwei, as long as you do your part.*

If she thought Kaz was tight-lipped about his plans in person, he's so much worse over letters. Even if she understands why, she has to wonder if the headaches were worth it. Understanding what she was meant to do was a bit like pulling teeth—actually, she probably would have gotten less resistance from Kaz if she *was* pulling his teeth—but eventually she'd made sense of the key parts: the circlet and the harbor. There's one down. Saints know what Kaz has done with the circlet. But now the harbor looms like a terrible gaping mouth in front of her, and the ferryman is beginning to row.

Some of the Dregs disperse. Those remaining shake their heads slowly, grip their caps tight, stare into nothing . A few onlooking sailors look on and mutter darkly. The waves murmur—perhaps condolences, perhaps good riddance. She's seen Kaz still before, but not like this. Usually he wills himself into immobility, the tension evident, taut and primed to strike. Now he's just limp. A cut wire. Distressingly mortal.

The silence on the quay swells like the rising tide.

“At last, Ketterdam is free,” Willem de Vries says. Nina dearly wishes she had her old powers so that she could make him wet himself.

But she doesn’t; she is the Corpsewitch, and Kaz and Inej and Jordan and the rest of them need her as she is now. *Until next time, Zenik.* That was always it between them. *Brekker, Zenik.* Jabs and jibes. *Nina dear, Nina sweet, Nina love.* Sometimes when she starts to lose a sense of her old name, when too many people call her Mila, she summons the memories of the Ice Court and the way that crew would say her name. Kaz was never a soldier in the way she and Matthias were, but he used their method of getting by—arguing, insulting, never letting up long enough to feel the enormity of what they were up against. Nina almost wishes he’d aggravate her now. Never did she expect she’d hope for *that.*

She’ll be damned if she never gets to insult his haircut again.

The shape of the barge is growing indistinct now, dark as it creeps towards the grey horizon. Ilya shows her their watch. It’s time.

Nina reaches out with her power, canvassing the harbor, its silty floor and its shipwrecks. The stone, the sand, the carved-out spaces around the docks, the distant depths hiding weeds and rusted anchors. She finds something—not a vein, but the rush of an icy northern river that has become so familiar. Its rapids churn and eddy around the quarry she’s looking for.

Bones. What must be hundreds of them. She’s known they must be there, but never has she sought them out like this. Some of them are full skeletons, others skulls or limbs or half a ribcage or mostly dust. It doesn’t matter. They’re all hers. She uses her full, furred sleeves for cover and pulls them up to attention.

Yes, I’m sure you’ve been having a lovely nap, but I need your help.

There are too many of them to grasp individual voices or souls, but they are angry, so angry that it almost swamps her. Bitterness and dissatisfaction wash over her, almost blurring her vision. They are unfulfilled and forgotten.

They’ll remember you now, Nina tells them with all the charm she’s ever been able to muster. *They’ll tell tales of this forever.*

And they probably will, she thinks, watching as the Ketterdam harbor begins to give up its dead.

There’s screaming from the merchant wives, and the sailors swear; the *stadwatch* and house guards start yelling, and they’re aiming their rifles, but what can they do against an army of corpses? Nina wants to laugh. She wants to crow— *Your bullets won’t touch them, just like they couldn’t kill that demon. Be sure of what you’re playing with next time.*

The skeletons are rising from the water in a gray swarm, figures of ashes, dragging kelp and shedding sand from their skulls and the divots of their joints. Black water pours from their empty eye sockets. There are worn and withered ones among them, small ones, children,

sailors gone overboard, bodies fallen from the Reaper's Barge, victims of naval battles and shootouts on the docks, capsized fishermen, ferrymen to and from the smaller islands. All of them vanished beneath a curtain of black water. All of them so, so angry. They're piling on top of one another, reaching, treading water, all crowding the barge with a terrible inevitability. And then they seize its sides and begin to rock.

Good. Nina makes another hidden gesture, urges them on. *This man didn't think you were worth more than the bottom of the sea. He didn't carry you to any final rest. Don't spare him your fate.*

She thinks there might be one corpse leading the charge, one clawing at her consciousness with the desire to crawl right onto the boat, but there are too many of them to be certain. They're flooding her with the madness of a mob. Too many debts have yet to be paid, and today they're all coming due.

"Ghezen's hand," Maurits Hembrecht says hoarsely. " *Demon.* "

The word is echoed by the other members of the Council, and then it ripples across the docks, from the Councilmen to *stadwatch* to soldiers standing by and Barrel toughs, all for a moment united by a rising storm of fear. The navy men of the firing squad clutch their rifles, blanching white. A berth is slowly clearing around Wylan. *Demon,* they whisper. *Demon Brekker.*

Typical Kaz getting all the credit, Nina thinks sourly, but maybe that's just the fury of the corpses talking. They're overflowing the sides of the boat now. Fingers of bone dig into the sides till they splinter. Teeth clamp onto slats. The barge is sitting lower and lower still in the water as they crawl over each other, hundreds of white eroded insects, piling the sickboat high with bodies. Burying its passengers under bones.

Sailors and merchants alike are going to their knees on the docks, their lips moving in furious prayer. The helpless pleading to the helpless. They are in her world now, and the dead are hungry for new compatriots.

The harbor is teeming with them now, the water churning as if some great fire beneath is bringing it to a boil. They swim like broken puppets, as if caught on fishing lines, their limbs bent at wrong angles, disconnected femurs and jawbones and shattered hands lunging upwards onto the barge. She can't see Kaz anymore and it still isn't enough.

Take what you're owed, Nina urges them, turning one hand over the other. Upwards they crawl, out of the water as if out of a grave, lurching and slipping and entirely unstoppable. There's a veritable island of them now. The ferryman is scrabbling, reaching upwards, and then his head is buried. Nina can't hear him scream. Maybe he never did.

And then the barge goes entirely under.

The one who is almost one of you. Take him around the shoreline. I will tell you where, Nina directs them. It's strange; she feels more alive in these moments, as if her heartbeat is supplying them too. The skeletons crowd underneath Kaz, bearing him aloft like a

conquering king—as for the ferryman, he'll have to fight for himself. He was always going to join his charges eventually.

"Ghezen help us," Wylan says in a decent impression of his horrified colleagues. He closes his eyes and, for a moment, really does look like he's pleading for salvation—though perhaps not the kind that the assembled crowd might think.

The corpses are a black cloud on the water, like a vast oilslick, slowly moving out of view. No effort is made to follow them. No one fires a shot. Nina has a feeling that they're all remembering the same thing she is: *This is my city. I've paid her price a thousand times. She won't let me go easy.*

Neither will Nina, or Jesper, or Wylan, or Inej. Not so soon. Not so late. She'd cut out her tongue before she'd be forced to admit it, but she can't bear the thought of never wanting to slap Kaz again.

Finally, the officials in attendance start to move—they go for boats, start shouting overlapping orders, saying prayers, planning exorcisms. No one is listening. They're like a flock of squalling guinea hens. "Follow me," Nina murmurs to Ilya, taking their hand. They step back into the concealment of their accompanying royal guard.

One of the Councilmen she doesn't know sniffs the air and looks back over his shoulder. "Is that smoke?"

And then the fire sirens start to scream.

<><><>

The towers of the Tides are among the first to go. They've become pillars of flame, crimson as the morning's sunrise. The Fjerdan embassy is consumed too—good, Nina thinks, it was an ugly building anyway—and the blaze is leaping through a scattering of *stadwatch* offices, gang strongholds, warehouses, Geldstraat mansions, and innocuous-seeming businesses. The sky over Ketterdam has gone nearly black with smoke. It could be midnight.

Nina sends Ilya to the meeting point and slips away to West Stave. It's an inferno. Every last one of the decrepit, seedy shells of pleasure houses is wild with flame, like a row of candles standing sentinel. A memorial burning for Ketterdam's monster.

They find Inej, of course, atop the blazing wreckage of what used to be the Menagerie, a crumbling building years empty and now collapsing from the foundation up. She is perched on the ash-encrusted beam of what was once the roof, knife-straight as if it's a high wire, one hand on her captain's hat.

Captain Prenjer is shouting himself hoarse like the fool he is. "Come down from there, Miss Ghafa," he bellows over the howl of flames. He halfway shields his eyes. "Surrender yourself safely."

Inej's hand flicks out and a knife narrowly misses the side of his head. Nina shrinks back further into the narrow alley she's hidden in. The street is almost empty but for Prenjer and

his men.

“Surrender *slaughtered* the man I loved,” she snarls, another knife flashing in her hand and then holstered again.

“You can still be saved.” Prenjer’s voice trembles. Nina scowls since he can’t see her. It’s not hard to tell that he doesn’t believe his own words.

“There is no saving a woman like me,” Inej says. Somehow, despite her usual ghostly silence, Nina has no trouble hearing her over the blaze. Prenjer doesn’t either, she thinks, judging by the pallor of his face.

It’s not hard to see now why people call her the Saint of the Sea, a savior standing tall as a blade against a backdrop of flame. She is all courage and pride as she speaks again. “Only the girl that I was. Save those girls instead.”

Fire sirens toll around them like church bells, funeral bells. “Pass my message to the murderers on the Merchant Council,” Inej goes on, and there’s a razor-edged croon in her voice that Nina has heard quite recently out of another mouth. She is a true performer even in these waning moments, poised far above the crowd with her head held high and posture never wavering. “Tell them to save the girls like me. Tell them that the day they do is the day they can stop examining every corner for my face and every shadow for my shape. Tell them that is the day they can stop listening for the kiss of steel, the day the Wraith no longer haunts them. Save the ones like me. Learn from my penance so I need not teach you.”

Her final, whispered words to Ketterdam, almost inaudible over the roar of flames, are in Suli. Most of the other spectators will die wondering. Nina, however, understands the words: they are a traditional prayer, a wish for blessings to be delivered even if they aren’t deserved, a plea that one’s penance has been enough. For a moment, she doesn’t understand the forms of words Inej has used; she’s only ever heard the phrase in the singular, first or second person, *me* or *you.* Now, however, Inej has said: *Let the Saints receive* us.

She speaks with her face raised to the sky, hands uplifted, scarred and calloused palms open. And then she leaps.

She kicks straight upward into a flip resplendent with elegance, legs over head, toes pointed, arched like a crescent moon; for a moment, she hangs there, seemingly suspended against the blackening sky. In that second, the billows of smoke flare behind her, blown from her shoulder blades by the gust of her movement, and it looks almost as if she has wings. Nina would be willing to believe that she does.

And then the moment breaks. Her captain’s hat falls first. The smoke reshapes again, already dissipating into the streets. Inej’s shadow stretches high and wild, and she snaps into a dive, and then she is falling, out of sight, into the incineration below.

The few watchers suck in a joint gasp. Prayers and pleadings are cried out. Nina stays quiet and watches.

There is no scream, no hiss of flame, not even a shower of sparks from the crumbling inferno of the Peacock's lair. The Wraith does as she always has: she disappears without a trace.

Chapter End Notes

teehee

Jordan/Inej

Chapter Summary

Jordan delivers the antidote. Inej lifts anchor.

Chapter Notes

I am back on my ao3 author nonsense, lads! roughly ten minutes after I posted last week's chapter, my region got hit by a hurricane that knocked out our internet and cell service for about 30 hours. I'm okay; roads around us closed, there was a gas shortage, and Walmart was mostly out of snacks, but we were surrounded by towns that fared much worse with flooding and landslides. I am staying with my family for a few weeks, far enough away that my hometown didn't see much damage, but western North Carolina is in dire need of help and support. I know I might be doxxing myself a bit here, but oh well. The American Red Cross as well as several other organizations are collecting funds to rebuild and provide supplies to the isolated areas, especially Asheville and the surrounding towns. now, with all that insanity out of the way, I owe you all some shout-outs~

The_ghost_writes, I get why the kudos system works like it does, but c'mon, ao3

thestarsinoureyes, inej was a performer first, after all!

maiden_of_crows, my house is slowly being invaded by readers. in my walls, at my door, eating the drywall...

MurderousWritingClub, thank you—the typo has been fixed!

sofia_volkov, nina will go to *great* lengths for insulting-kaz purposes.

GNM_dreaming_girl, I love your use of "magical", hehe!

thephonyqueenofengland, I do love making you all speechless.

Lusxnei6, I'm glad you liked that speech <33

RipplingReader, teehee is a lifestyle that I cannot abandon.

Lunarmoo, kanej will go down in history as the power couple of unsolved mysteries, for sure.

jzmn8r, nina will fight tooth and nail to save kaz's life but ofc never admit that they might be friends. because that's how sibling energy works.

Heiress_Kyr, nope, not late at all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the little boat approaches the cliffs at Rentveer, Jordan starts to understand the reason for Nina's skeletons. Well, besides looking scary and putting the fear of Kaz into the merchers one last time. Jagged rocks jut up from the water where they're buffeted by foamy white waves, impassable by a ship but easily navigated by uninjurable corpses. Even at this distance, Jordan's arms are worn and strained from fighting with the oars. She's holding them almost as tightly as the memory of Kaz's pulse, flickering like a candle under her fingertips.

The antidote is in the satchel at her hip. Jesper and Ilya will be approaching by land from above. All she has to do is get up the cliff.

That, and talk the cave's guardians into letting them pass. No pressure.

When she's gotten the little boat, barely more than a dinghy, as close to the rocky shore as she can, Jordan picks up the coil of rope from the floor of the boat and lashes it to the prow with a sailor's knot. Then she puts down the oars and clambers over the side, dropping into the water.

It's shallow but cold; she takes in a sharp breath when her head bobs up, struggling against the strength of the turbulent currents. She really wishes they'd stop trying to dunk her under. But Jordan is stronger, stronger even than this ocean; she resurfaces, pins her eyes on the shore, and starts to swim. It's hard to stay towards it, and the waves keep throwing her back and down, but soon her feet can touch the silty seafloor, and then it's just a matter of struggling towards the rocks.

She gets close enough to seize one of the jutting rocks and drag herself forward by it, onto the barest ledge of shore where she finds her footing on a flat bank of stone. She loops the rope around the spire of rock and toes it to hold fast. They'll need the boat later, with any luck.

The cliff just looks like any other wall of earth, but somewhere above her is the pathway to the cave. And somewhere in that cave is Kaz.

Jordan pulls out her climbing spikes and starts upward. It took her too long to get here. They're running short on time.

She climbs so fast her forearms burn and the rock crumbles concerning in some places, but caution isn't exactly one of the things she's good at. When she hauls herself over the cliff, the welcome party is already there.

Jordan wonders if they were waiting for her. There's a whole group of them—Suli, masked, jackal and otherwise. Real masks and real silk, not the imitations that Inej gives dark looks to in Ketterdam's tourist shops. Several of them are holding Ilya and Jesper back.

Jordan gets to her feet with as much grace as she can. “These are my people,” she tells them in Suli, conscious of how city-harsh her accent is. “And they come to help a Ghafa. We can let them pass.”

Technically, her surname isn’t Ghafa and neither is Kaz’s, but this isn’t a time for being technical . Not that Jordan usually is anyway.

One of the Suli with a cloth mask rather than a jackal steps forward, and Jordan recognizes the shape of his crinkling dark eyes, not to mention his voice when he speaks. “When I said I hoped to see the world, I’m not sure this is what I meant.”

She grins. “Stefan! Your hair’s too long. What would *nani* say?”

“You’re still not a nice girl,” he grumps. Behind him, the others relax their guard and let Jesper and Ilya shuffle forward onto the narrow path, Ilya looking particularly uncomfortable given their stature.

“No one from Ketterdam is nice. But some of us can still be kind.” Jordan looks up the loops of the winding path and the half-hidden place where they disappear. Afternoon is burning through the fog at their backs, but whispers of smoke are rolling in from the city. “We need to get up to the cave.”

Stefan doesn’t ask questions. Maybe he's been trained out of that habit. “Follow me,” he says.

They do, past the other Suli who’ve come with him, up the cliffside. It’s treacherous work. A few of the others trail them, and Jordan hears their murmurs: *Zheji.* Daughter. She doesn’t know them, but they welcome her home.

Her chest feels tight. She is a pirate and a doctor and a thief and a lot of things, none of whom are meant to cry. So she doesn’t. But she wants to. She is a daughter to many, it seems like, but one of them is the most important today. She has to get to him. She wants to at least see him, if she can’t save him.

But she can and she will, she tells herself. She’ll bring him back. She’ll get him back to the apple trees. He and Inej taught her courage, and she reaches for it now.

The path widens and then is swallowed by the dark mouth of a cavern up ahead; when they reach it, Stefan stops. Ilya and Jesper come up slowly behind them, panting. Jordan would tease Jesper for being out of shape if it were a different day, a different place.

Could a mob of harbor-worn skeletons make this climb? She really hopes so.

“The guards are much deeper, down the tunnel towards the base,” Stefan tells her. “If you go no further, you’ll be all right.” He pauses and withdraws a slab of chocolate from his pocket, then breaks off a piece and gives it to her. “Still not poisoned.”

He really is trying to make her cry. Jordan turns her face stubbornly away. “On a better day for it, you’ll have to tell me what you’re doing in Kerch.”

“It’s home for us as much as anyplace else.” Stefan shrugs. He motions with his head towards the cave. “But I gladly await that better day. Now, go on.”

Jordan smiles at Stefan, just a little, before starting into the cavern. Last she saw him, they promised to trade old dances for new stories. “Now you have a new story to tell.”

Jesper pulls out a bonelight, which flares dim and blue as they venture into the immediate darkness of the cave. Jordan can see now that it leads down further, but she doesn’t need to go into the tunnel—not when the light falls on a human shape in the corner. Kaz is laying right there, slumped at the base of the wall. The skeleton pallbearers are nowhere to be seen.

All three of them run to his side.

“The—?” Ilya makes a vague syringe-plunging motion. “You have?”

The antidote. Jordan kneels next to Kaz and wonders how she’s keeping her hands steady as she withdraws the syringe and injects it, the same place she injected the poison. She puts a hand to his pulse. Nothing.

“How long do we have to wait?” Jesper asks nervously, shifting from foot to foot.

“ *You* don’t,” Jordan says, a bit more harshly than she means to, but look who raised her. “You can start your job now.”

“Right.” It’s strange how he seems to leap to action as if following her orders, as if she’s not half his age. But he and Ilya kneel on opposite sides of Kaz and start to work.

With the half of her mind that isn’t focused on her da’s pulse or lack thereof, it’s fascinating to watch the pair of them. Jesper doesn’t speak Fjerdan and Ilya can barely say ‘hello’ in Kerch, but they fall into a rhythm anyway—Jesper draws out the bullet, then Ilya puts their hands to the hole it left and begins to mend the damage. A Healer without any amplifiers or outside help won’t be able to vanish these wounds entirely, but they can undo the worst of the damage.

“At least none of them went all the way through,” Jesper says, cracking a weak grin that falls away as fast as it came.

“Or hit anything important,” Jordan supplies. If she can’t keep her own spirits up, she can at least try for everyone else. *Why isn’t it working?* She injects the rest of the antidote, more than Kaz should need, as much as she can give him without harming him more than helping.

Still nothing. Her eyes burn. She can feel the others watching her.

“I don’t know—” Jordan’s voice breaks and she tries again. She’s out of ideas, but they’re looking at her like she’s supposed to have one more. Jordan wants to scream and remind them who the adults are here, the country-runners. “Maybe if one of you—”

This time, she’s broken off not by her own voice or lack of words, but by a stirring under her fingers. Something. All the breath rushes out of her lungs. A fickle, stubborn beat. Subtle, waxing and waning like a distant lighthouse, but undeniably there.

Jordan can't help it. She lays her head down on her da's chest and starts to sob.

"Saints." Jesper must be assuming the worst. She's never heard him sound so crestfallen. "No. *No.* "

"It's not that," Jordan manages, scrubbing the heels of her hands into her eyes. "It—it worked."

Suddenly, there's a stirring of more than Kaz's pulse—he lifts his head, and Jordan automatically sits up. Ilya moves back, lifting their hands, looking afraid. Jordan can, admittedly, understand why.

His eyes are unfocused, pupils blown wide, but oh, Saints, he's *alive.* Jordan wants nothing more than to fling her arms around him, but even now, she won't do it without asking first—and he's not yet in a state to answer.

She's shocked to see a smile slide onto Kaz's face. His eyes move from her to Jesper, and yet she gets the sense that he isn't quite seeing them. "Good," he says, strangely weary, almost relieved. "You're here to save me again." Then his head sags back.

"Again?" Jordan asks. But Kaz's eyes have slipped closed, and his chest rises and falls in a rhythm that's steady enough for her to calm her own breathing. She looks back at Jesper, expecting him to be as confused as she is, but there's a sad understanding in his expression. "Again?" she asks once more, this time aimed at him.

His smile is so melancholy. She still doesn't know why. "Not us," Jesper says. "He's not talking to us."

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The little boat approaches far too slowly, distant, tremulous as a fading heartbeat on the waves. Inej's heart is in her throat as she watches.

No. Her heart is in that rowboat.

She clings to the side of the converted fishing boat that they've christened the *Sankt Demyan* — in a moment of dark humor, Sinyen had suggested the patron saint of the newly dead—watching Jordan bob over the currents towards them, struggling with her oars. She is fighting the ocean so well, their brave little crow; if not for its anchor, the *Sankt Demyan* would have been driven to shore and be splintered on the rocks now.

Inej needs her own anchor. She needs him living and well. In this terrible limbo where he could be lifeless or merely asleep under that blanket, on the rowboat's floor behind their daughter, she herself feels driven to the cliffs, beaten against the rocks. There will be no home for her if they can't save Kaz.

San, her makeshift first mate and the only other occupant of the fishing boat, throws Jordan a line with which to pull herself in. Inej doesn't breathe until the two crafts are floating side-

by-side. Only then does she open her lungs to the salt air, to the strength she needs to reach down and help hoist Kaz up onto the boat.

He's unconscious but breathing. Inej whispers a prayer of thanks. She rearranges the blanket quickly around him to cushion his head and uncover his face, revealing at the same time the pattern of half-healed wounds that spangle his chest. They'll need bandages, but the bleeding has stopped.

"He's going to be okay," Jordan says. Her eyes are red, but no one comments.

In a different life, Inej might have cried too. In this one, she leans over the rail almost to the tipping point until she can reach and clasp her daughter's hands. "Be careful, *me vranika* ," she says, squeezing tight. "Be safe."

She sees Jordan take in a shuddering breath. She is so strong. Is it some failure of hers and Kaz's that Jordan had to learn that strength? Did they not protect her well enough, not spare her the suffering they had both known by nineteen?

But Jordan is as safe as she could be with the lives they all lead. She can heal and not hurt. She can pray in any language that feels like home. She can love without looking over her shoulder. She can get married if she wants, or not; she never has to have a family of her own, but she could if she wanted, without the price of nights spent trembling just to share the same bed. She'll be all right. Inej just wishes she could be there to see it.

"I will, mama." Jordan bows her forehead to their joined hands, a Suli gesture and a way to hide any more tears. "You too."

San's fingertips gently brush her shoulder. "It's time to go."

If Inej has tears of her own to shed, they can wait. She is singed and smoke-stained and weary to her bones, but Kaz will be all right and Jordan will be all right and the future lies before them, impatient for them to catch up. "Lift anchor," she says, releasing the line that holds Jordan to them.

She doesn't watch Jordan leave. She'll be all right. She looks up to the cliffs instead, to the pathway where the figures of Jesper and Ilya stand. Jesper raises an arm in what could be a salute or a wave. Inej takes it as both. *No mourners.*

They turn the sail and start towards the open sea. She sets a hand on Kaz's chest and feels it move as the waves do beneath them. *No funerals.*

Chapter End Notes

1) it does not escape me that I posted the chapter where inej burns down the menagerie and then got hit by hurricane *helene*.

2) I have only read the chapters of RoW that the crows are in and any relevant details from the wiki, so I apologize for any inconsistencies in these chapters. also, it seems like there isn't a canon consensus on hanne's new name and pronouns, but I see most people using "ilya" and went with they/them for lack of further certainty.

Inej/Omniscience

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej make it to morning, to the farmhouse, and to something like peace.

Chapter Notes

I'm feeling nostalgic this week, and already somehow missing this fic in a kind of anticipation. let's take our minds off of that with some shout-outs~

thestarsinoureyes, cruel twists of fate seem to be their specialty, I fear

maiden_of_crows, I love that you caught that reference!

thephonyqueenofengland, of course I couldn't do a dramatic send-off without reuniting the gang for a moment :)

MurderousWritingClub, believe it or not, the sweetness will continue in this one <3

Heiress_Kyr, I have a lot of feelings about the two of them and the ship-anchor analogy.

RipplingReader, oh don't you worry, the callbacks aren't over yet.

GNM_dreaming_girl, names aside, I like to think that he *is* a Ghafa by suli standards.

shieldmaiden19, he had to say goodbye TT

Lusxnei16, it's friday again! happy friday <3

Lunarmoo, isn't it unbelievable that they actually did it?

jzmn8r, I hope your family's okay! this has been rough for all of us <\3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaz being Kaz, he's awake before they make landfall for the journey to Lij. One moment the *Sankt Demyan* is clipping through the sea around the Kerch coast, San at the helm and Inej monitoring Kaz, and the next second his eyes are flying open, pupils massive, black and darting. Inej is quick to put herself in his field of vision, but he has already hurtled straight into panic, reaching for a weapon that isn't there.

“Kaz!” She doesn’t touch him, but she does lean over him. “It’s me. Your plan worked. I’m safe, Jordan is safe. We’re sailing south.”

His expression settles into a jittery, unsteady kind of focus. “Inej.”

Saints. Hearing him say her name again is—it’s like a lever that allows the certainty, the terrible aching relief, to drop onto her like a bag of sand. It’s over. It’s truly over.

So much more slowly than she wants to, Inej opens her hands to him, reaching for his, which are draped loosely over his battered torso. “May I?”

“The plan worked?” There’s a shadow of the old Kaz in him as his lucidity comes back, not surprised, just confirming. He runs one bare hand over his chest. “Jesper did his part.”

It isn’t a question. “You’re speaking to me, aren’t you?”

He nods slowly, as much movement as he can make. “So there’s still no justice in the world.” His hands, his clever magician’s hands that she has never seen move so slowly, close around one of hers. They cover it up, make it vanish. Here and then gone, but this time she knows the trick. This time she’s behind the curtain.

Inej puts her forehead to his chest and feels him breathe. She does not weep. Slowly, slowly, they fall into time.

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The ride to the farmhouse is quiet, a montage of silences. It’s darkening by the time they make land, night by Lij, and they ride to the Rietveld property in the star-scattered black of the early hours. San drives them on an unassuming wagon through the miles of dry summer green, revealing itself by pieces as the sun comes up. Inej does not leave her post at Kaz’s side, even though he refuses to go back to sleep; he asks her questions, or makes her ask him questions, when his eyelids start to flicker.

She doesn’t tell him to rest. Perhaps she should. But that is not the kind of people they are; it never has been. She treats it like a stakeout, like they’re watching the house for entrances, exits, security. Its only inhabitants now are ghosts, which she must pray have been set blessedly free.

They arrive and it’s quiet. The air is clean. The sun is coming up. Somewhere, a lark calls from the trees. Inej offers Kaz an arm to get down from the cart, but white-lipped, he refuses, setting down instead the wooden walking stick he’s used many times for disguises. For a moment she truly does think he’s going to buckle or even go down, when his face goes from pale to gray and his balance wavers, but somehow he manages to walk up the dirt path to the farmhouse. Hiding pain is familiar territory for them. Inej wonders if they’ll unlearn it after enough years here.

She looks back and San is gone. She was so focused on Kaz that she didn’t even see the wagon leave.

Inej matches Kaz's pace and they shuffle inside, upon which she finds that the house is much more…furnished than before. The old piano, bench, and little table are still in place, but the front room now has two plush armchairs and a footstool, slightly mismatched in style and source, in similar shades of blue and green. The little table has been placed like a coffee table now, and in the kitchen, she can see blue gingham curtains on the windows, parted and patterned with tulips.

"You redecorated," she muses.

Kaz has sunk into the armchair with the footstool, head back, eyes shut. He releases a long breath. "I paid a contractor from Lij to redecorate."

"I see you're well enough for technicalities. The woods would be silent if no birds sang except those that sang perfectly." She thinks she hears that lark again.

"And I see you're well enough for proverbs." Despite his humor, however, Inej sees him grimace when he moves; she sees the slight shiver that passes through him every so often, the loll of his head. His words are coming too slowly. She goes to him and carefully peels away the heavy wool coat they'd used to cover his bloodstained prisoner's garb until he could move enough to change into something else. Luckily, it hasn't stuck to him or even stained very much, but the shirt will be a different story.

It would be easier if he were laying flat or on a bed, but Inej is unsure how much more movement Kaz has in him—even his monumental will can only drive a mortal body so far. He seems to understand her intent and starts undoing the buttons of the shirt, and somehow Inej can barely watch it. She has never seen his hands so slow. Not since the prisoner's wagon on the way into the Ice Court. Ilya managed to stop most of the bleeding after the bullets were removed, but how much blood had he already lost?

She can see now that the spots around the wounds are encrusted with that very blood, dried now and probably clinging to Kaz's skin. The wounds need cleaning. "I'll need water," she says. "It's going to be cold."

"The tap," Kaz says. He must have had hot water installed as well. But the cold is not her true fear. Wet skin has been the final monument for him, even after all of their years of struggling and mending by one another's side. And Kaz was, though unconscious, pulled quite recently from the harbor by a crowd of Ketterdam's dead. Will this be too much?

His hand closes around her wrist, strong despite his state. Skin on skin, and he holds her stare. "The tap," he says again. His nod is firm. Inej understands: *I'll be fine*. And since she vowed to trust him on her first visit to this town, she goes to the sink and fills a bowl with warm water. There are even a few more dishes in the cabinets than last time.

Hot water is an unexpected blessing, and for this she murmurs a prayer of thanks. After this she'll run each of them a steaming bath.

She returns to Kaz's chair with the bowl and a rag, both of which she sets on the low table. She dampens the rag, wrings it out. His eyes track her every motion.

Before she begins, she runs a hand through his mess of hair, dragging her hails lightly over his scalp. He gives a shaky exhale, eyes sliding shut for a moment; the shaven sides have grown a bit longer than he usually keeps them, and there's a scruff along his jaw to match. Inej treasures these details, tucks them away beside the most valuable secrets she possesses. The moments where the legend fades, where the veil of Kaz Brekker is thin. Now, by all rights, it should be left behind in Ketterdam altogether.

Done delaying, she begins peeling the shirt back as slowly as she can. Kaz looks slightly distant, but more or less lucid. She comes close to one of the wounds, however, and his brow furrows with what could almost be called a wince. Another, and his shoulders clench. She does her best to wet the fabric without touching the wounds themselves, and if she were only watching Kaz's face she'd think he was stoic through it all, but the smallest shifts of muscle or breath betray the pain he's in.

But then it's done. The shirt is open down the front, revealing five angry red puckers scattered across his stomach and chest.

"I need to get it off your arms," she says.

Kaz shifts himself up as well as he can, arms extended back, though she sees his brow crease again at the awkward motion.

He'll tell her he isn't something to be gentle with. Inej knows that. But that doesn't keep her from wanting to try.

She withdraws Sankt Petyr and makes a neat slice down the length of each sleeve, careful not to nick or scratch his skin. The shirt comes apart easily. It's not as if he'll want it again; as far as Inej is concerned, they can throw it into the fire.

"Clever trick, treasure." His eyes fall shut again, his breathing slowing.

"You aren't the only one who knows some." She sets the ruined fabric aside and begins the process of cleaning each wound, clearing away stuck bits of thread and old blood. Ilya mitigated the worst of the damage, but Kaz will be in fragile shape for some time now, which neither of them look forward to. Inej loves her husband dearly, but he is a terrible patient.

Her eyes keep snagging on the faded tattoo on his bicep. R. *Rietveld*. How young was he when he got it? She's never asked. Perhaps, in a new way, now, it will remain a reminder of what he's fighting for. Something like home. Something like peace.

"Last time I was shot," he says, watching her through half-closed eyes, "I gouged out the bullet myself."

Inej remembers having discovered that scar, a star of silver just above his hipbone. "I'm not letting you tend to yourself, Kaz."

"No. I think I prefer being fussed over by a Saint."

"Kaz."

“Have they made you patron of something?”

“The Ravkan church doesn’t recognize me, nor should they.” But she can’t say she hasn’t heard the stories. In moments like this, she wishes she had some greater wisdom or power, some ability to grant blessings. Instead she gives penance to those who will not take it for themselves.

“What do the people say?” Of course that’s what Kaz wants to know. Reputation and rumor. After all, this entire scheme was built on those things—leaving the city with stories of a ghost and a demon, leaving the merchers and slavers with the fear that any shadowy moment, any night that they dare close their eyes, Dirtyhands and the Wraith will wait for them in the dark.

She begins applying the bandages, trying not to touch Kaz, but she can see and hear it as he slips in and out of focus, in and out of the past. “Some say I’m the patron of those who’ve lost their homes,” she admits.

Somehow, Kaz manages to laugh through a violent shiver as her fingertips brush over his ribs. “You mean to tell me that all along, with all of my blasphemy, I’ve been following your religion right?” His eyes are pinned on her, which she suspects is a way of keeping present.

Keep talking. “What do you mean?”

“I’m like any humble family man, Inej. When I wish kind seas for my wife and kind cities for my daughter, I pray to my patron Saint.”

She would never describe Kaz as ‘humble’, but the relief overflowing in her now is too great to argue. Inej smoothes down the last bandage and lifts her hands away. “You’ve found your home again.”

He looks up at her with a rapturous gaze, and she remembers, *you’ve seen it every time you meet my eyes*. Even through the haze of pain and memory, that look hasn’t dimmed. “Many are her blessings.”

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I can help you. She never said it, she realizes, not this time.

Then again, she didn’t have to. He already knows.

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Under the eyes of a little country town, life returns to the Rietveld farm.

It’s a slow thing; Ambrose Janssen’s son-in-law has been keeping up the fields, but now he’s doing something more than pulling weeds. As summer unfurls, a wildflower garden appears, and then the gaps in the fence are mended; the nodding heads of grass are cut into straw, and the apple trees grow green and strong for autumn harvest.

Words spreads fast when people start to notice. Few in Lij and the surrounding towns remember that family anymore, but those who do tell stories and sometimes even drop by the farm.

They're strange, the Rietvelds, but good people. Reserved and soft spoken, but never aloof. Distant but not cold. Hard to find if you pay a visit; often they're out in the fields, or by the back stream, or they'll turn up with one covered in flour and the other streaked with oil. Mrs. Rietveld wears her hair down even with guests over, and her husband consults her on matters of business while openly toying with the long strands, but perhaps that's just how things are in the city.

That is after he spends the first few weeks recovering from some injury or other. Little can be gleaned from his wife's scolding him to rest, or the fragile way he holds himself, but the herbs hanging in the kitchen show evidence of fever tonics and poultices for wounds. By and large he refuses help, except to contract out the majority of the fields, but of course the neighbors send coffee and cheese and various practical gifts regardless.

Lise Aalder, formerly Janssen, takes them a basket of *appeltaart* as a belated welcome. Her husband has been contracted to maintain the farm, so it only seems right. And she understands why, she tells her friends later; Mrs. Rietveld is lovely and Lise couldn't guess at her age, but despite the relative youth of her husband's face, he seems to have sustained some long-ago injury besides the new ones, moving little from his chair and relying on a carved walking stick when he does. They're wonderfully hospitable, Lise says, but—and she cannot explain it to her friends in a way they understand—there is an old, old sadness about the Rietvelds, something nested in their dark eyes and halfway smiles.

Her father is unsurprised. The city does that to common people, he says. It puts a price on the soul and you in debt for it.

Sometimes the debtor collects, Lise knows. Her husband has told her about the headstone at the back of the Rietveld property. The one clumsily engraved with her old playmate's name. This, she keeps to herself.

Sophie Kottier sends them preserves and jams enough to last through winter, which is a long while away yet. She may be widowed and devoted first to her flowers, but she is at the Church of Ghezen each weekend and knows every story the town has to tell. She says that Kaz looks terribly like his ma. Never to his face, but who could say it to his face? Who could look into those clever, watching eyes and not feel redundant saying it? It would be like telling your reflection that it looked like you.

Ambrose Janssen doesn't say it either, but he agrees.

The news arrives from Ketterdam that some terrible gangster is dead and his lover burned the city in revenge. The townsfolk murmur relief that the Rietvelds escaped before they too were caught in the disaster. For some reason, Kaz seems to find this amusing, though when asked he'll say it truly is a blessing.

Impossible, says Mr. Habers, Priest of Ghezen. Mr. Rietveld hardly attends church and never prays when he does. He spends the whole service whispering to his wife.

They are more often seen, on the whole, than directly spoken to; the pair of them seem wreathed in something that others can see but never be let into. Perhaps that's what she witnessed, Lise tries to explain. There's something they've seen that no one else will understand. After all, they have their share of scars and gaps in their histories—topics brushed past in conversation like tender bruises—and that old, old sadness. The roughness of Inej's hands. The threads of gray in her husband's hair. The youth in their faces doesn't seem right.

Strangely, the children seem to mind the least. They trail the Rietvelds and ask for stories of the city or the sweets that Kaz seems to summon from thin air. The little girls are fascinated with Inej. Many of them have never seen a Suli woman before, but more importantly they've never seen someone with so much hair. And such beautiful hair, gleaming and well-kept. One market day in Lij, they convince her to let them braid it—Kerch braids tied up in loops with flowers tucked between the strands, aster and bee-balm, chrysanthemum and marigold. She sits on the grass and laughs at their endless questions, and her husband looks on with the fullest smile anyone has seen on him since they arrived. She beckons him to bend down and when he does, leaning on his cane, she tucks a scarlet tulip behind his ear.

The sun has been good to them. Mr. Rietveld has the faintest of freckles amid the faded scars his face bears. His wife glows golden in the late afternoon. And Lise Aalder, standing by with a jug of milk beneath her arm, thinks for a moment that the sadness about them has faded.

Summer is almost ending, the leaves already turning colors of honey and syrup and wine; yet it is this gilded moment that feels, finally, like the start of something new.

Chapter End Notes

oh also, thank you to everyone for the well-wishes, hurricane-related and otherwise. fellow fic writer and SOC fan camelliawrites is doing a wonderful fundraiser—fic commissions to raise money for hurricane relief! last I saw, there was a google form on her tumblr :)

Kaz

Chapter Summary

Kaz and Inej return to the city for a special occasion.

Chapter Notes

I finished writing this fic yesterday. that felt so surreal. despite the melancholy mood I'm in, of course, it's time for shout-outs~

thestarsinoureyes, kanej need therapy, but they also ARE therapy

thephonyqueenofengland, I do love a good outside POV (clearly.)

jzmn8r, that's such a mood.

Lusxnei6, I figured you all deserved some fluff after, well….everything XD

MurderousWritingClub, it really is sweet (and so are you) <3

cameliawrites, I love your mention of the sense
of nostalgia in that chapter, because even though the characters are technically moving into a new future, there's definitely a sense of
sweet memories there <3

RipplingReader, rip those future readers and their collective heart attacks, lol.

GNM_dreaming_girl, in my head, they definitely figure out a way for jordan to visit :)

a_shard_of_glass, I love my binge readers <3

Lunarmoo, I see you're one of culture, a fellow lover of hot baths.

shieldmaiden19, we'll all have some happy tears, I think.

Heiress_Kyr, in our hearts of hearts, I think we all knew he would :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five years later

Kaz turns forty. Then he turns forty-one. There's a lack of significance to either one that is, in itself, significant. Birthdays feel less like a countdown running out, or a count-up of the years since he lost his brother. Time just passes and he doesn't keep books on it. He doesn't look at the ledger of the years. There are no debts to be tracked, not here, not anymore.

For similar reasons, he and Inej have been enjoying long, lazy mornings. Spring is in first blush now, but there's a distinct chill that bookends the days, and a great satisfaction comes with warding it off under covers. In some cases, this merely means laying awake with their eyes shut, bickering over who deserves more blankets. In other cases, it means reaping the full rewards of their years of healing and ability to touch, discovering one another over and over again.

Today is the former; eventually Inej sits up and stretches, the sun through the window outlining her body in shadow through her thin sleep shift. The arch of her back, the taut line of her stomach, the upward reach of her arms. She sighs in satisfaction and swings her legs over the side of the bed.

Kaz props himself up on his elbows, and the quilt slips down from his bare shoulders to his waist. He doesn't miss the smooth flicker of his wife's eyes over his skin, and he gives her a smug look in return. "We'll have to leave in two bells if we want to make Belendt in time for the browboat."

She shakes her head slowly at him. "It's not a job, Kaz."

"But it is a con."

"No alarms ringing, no broken gears of a scheme." She twists her hair, shimmering in the light, into a loose knot. Her wedding band flashes. They wear them openly these days. "I'm going to take a bath."

Kaz sits up and runs a hand over his face, clearing the fog of sleep from his vision. "Tea or coffee?"

She beams, and there could be rainstorm out the window or a black thatch of clouds—the room would still be full of light. This is all he needs. "Coffee."

"Correct," Kaz says, the corner of his mouth curling up. He stands and begins to limp to the kitchen, but pauses in the doorway to take Inej by the waist. She looks up at him through the fans of her eyelashes in a way that makes heat spread slowly through him, and he cups her jaw, then brings her face up to his for a slow, lingering kiss. Their mouths part lazily against each other and slide together in rhythm before breaking apart. "Two bells is a long time," he says.

She's slow to walk away, looking back over her shoulder with her neck long and golden, and Kaz knows she's doing it on purpose. "You know where to find me, *me vrano*."

He shakes his head as he goes to the kitchen. His terrible, decent, clever wife.

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Inej pins her hair up to look short and dresses in farmer's clothes; specifically, some of Kaz's clothes, which he greatly enjoys seeing on her. Of course, the cuffs are rolled four times each and and the tail of the belt hangs off to the side, but all the more reason that he keeps stealing glances at her like the thief he is.

In his case, they've chalked his hair to a fully ashen grey, extending that which has already started to fill in on the sides. It's progressed from single strands to full locks, but he can't truly complain because Inej has a fondness for it. He's grown his beard out a bit, which she likes much less, but it does wonders for changing his appearance. Besides that, he has altered his features a bit with putty and is wearing a heavy scarf that itches.

If he was in the practice of doing that sort of thing, he'd thank the Saints that the browboat from Belendt to Ketterdam isn't terribly crowded. Despite the decades of work and frustration and progress, getting caught in the crush of a crowd still makes him feel ill and panicked.

"Did you bring a razor?" she asks him, looking down the waterway as she sits a yard away from him. It might raise too much suspicion for them to be seen together, even in disguise, but the space they've put between them doesn't do much for that.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Yes."

"You're shaving once we get to the manor."

"Am I?"

"Or I'll do it myself."

Kaz hums, considering.

"With Sankta Lizabeta."

That holds a different sort of appeal, but they won't have that sort of time once they arrive. Unfortunate though it is. He gives himself solace with the thought of her this morning, shining fresh from the bath and cloaked in steam, with long, sweet sighs slipping from her mouth.

She purses her lips in place of saying his name like she usually would, pointed and beautiful in her irritation. After all these years, he still loves to needle her, just for the satisfaction of it all.

They get off at Ketterdam, two harmless, wide-eyed visitors from the country, maybe immigrants looking for work, maybe tourists with a few extra kruge from a lucky week or month. Anyone can seem to be anyone in this city. Actually becoming someone new, that's the trick.

Kaz has had enough dying and being reborn for now. You can only die so many times.

They'll be far too conspicuous wondering along the Geldstraat, so instead they slip into a costume shop with half the other passengers off the Belendt line and don the costumes of the

Madman and the Lost Bride. Now they're all but unrecognizable as they walk up East Stave, and Kaz keeps a critical eye on all that has changed. Jordan updates him some, but it's different to see it.

The Crow Club and the Silver Six are still sprawling, though not much more than five years ago. Maybe they've finally plateaued. There is, however, a new facade a few doors down, with a pair of gloved hands bracketing the sign: The Bastard's Bet.

"The Dregs have expanded," Inej murmurs.

Ria is doing an able job with the reputation that was entrusted to her, it seems. She knows how to work a rumor. But he was never particularly concerned about her.

He chose Ria because she has a sharp eye and a sharper tongue; because she's quick and precise where he is brutal and stubborn. She's a sniper. She doesn't need to be an endurance hunter because she can cut down her enemy from a block away and walk free. She doesn't have to outlast like Kaz did. She doesn't have to learn the secret to falling if no one gets the chance to knock her down. And that's all she has to do—with the Dregs as the biggest name in the Barrel these days, staying on top means cutting uprisings off at the root. Trimming the excess when the other gangs start to throw their weight around. Rarely giving second chances and never wasting time on traitors. She's doing that just fine.

They follow the crowd into the Crow Club, which looks acceptably busy, and duck into the private parlor with a concerning amount of ease. He'll have to tell Ria to swap out those bruisers. The tunnel is easy work from there, and though the hard walk ahead is hardly an exciting prospect, things are, overall, going almost concerningly well.

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The greeting is, to be honest, riotous. They're not even up the path to the side door when Jesper flings the it wide, beaming, and drags them into the kitchen. Under the changed, yellower light, Kaz gets his first decent look at Jesper and he looks, somehow….more or less the same. His hair is cut perhaps a bit shorter, but his face is lineless, his grin the same as it has been since he was sixteen.

"Is that you under all of that chalk and burlap?" he all but crows, almost elbowing a passing cook into the counter.

Inej laughs, pulling the pins from her hair, and as it tumbles down her back Kaz fully stops where he's standing. Even now, even when he sees her every day, she manages to stun him with how entirely lovely she is—her smile radiant, her laugh ambrosiac and warm, flinging her arms around Jesper and being lifted by the waist and spun like they're teenagers again.

And Kaz realizes—he doesn't feel jealous when Jesper holds her or twirls her anymore. Because he could do that too. And at the end of the day, she doesn't belong to anyone, but she'll be laying next to him.

"Hello, beautiful," Jesper says, putting her down, and then he turns to Kaz. There's warmth in his eyes still, but something different, something more cautious. Something less like joy and

more like hope. “And the old man?”

Kaz runs a hand through his hair, though it doesn’t wipe off much of the chalk and now his face is dusty. “Hello, Jes.”

“Any chance you want a twirl too?”

“No. But the rest is…” He swallows once. “Fine.”

Jesper’s careful smile grows a fraction, and he lifts his arms. Always leaving his heart open without a second thought. That’s just like Jes. But it means there’s always room for a distant friend to come back to. Kaz can’t say he’d change it—not if he wanted to tell the truth.

He takes a few steps forward, and then Jesper’s hugging him again. It’s—it’s not easy. It might never be easy. Everything in him screams, *danger*. Screams, *this is how you lose him. This is how you lose him again.*

When he woke up in that cave, it was Jesper and Jordan there, Jesper and Jordan leaning over him. But to him, delirious and confused, it was all Jordie. It was just Jordie, bringing him to shore.

He breathes into it. He’s been on dry land for a while now. And this is Jesper, Jesper who kept him alive.

He steps away after a moment, and then Inej is looking through the doorway into the dining room. “Where is she?”

Jesper follows where she’s looking. “I think—”

“*Mama*!”

Jordan comes flying into the kitchen, almost knocking Jesper over and traumatizing a passing cook, and leaps at Inej with force. She’s wearing some kind of silk robe, and her hair is would up in an absurdly complicated coil of braids. Kaz spots patterns of henna on her hands.

Their letters have been barely enough, the visits far too few. Seeing her makes something dangerous close up his throat.

“Hello, Jordan,” he manages to say.

She pulls him into the hug, too, and for a moment it’s the three of them again, all holding each other, all beating hearts and a great and terrible joy. None of it is as frightening as it used to be. Most things are that way, these days.

Jordan pulls them inside. “Everyone’s here,” she chatters. “Colm and obviously Marya and *Nani* and Ria and Sinyen and Alby’s upstairs with Wylan, I think. *Nani* did his hands for him and she offered to help me get ready, but…” She suddenly stops short and turns to Inej. For a moment, she is the shy girl of many years ago, eyes lowered, voice soft. “I was wondering. If you would help me instead.”

Kaz can see Inej swallowing down tears, but he doesn't speak. "I don't know if I'll do it right, *meja*," she says.

Jordan takes one of Inej's hands in both of her own. "You will. Because it's you."

Kaz and Jesper both pretend not to see her cry.

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Jordan gets married in red as her mother couldn't. Kaz almost allows himself to feel that this means they did something right.

Everyone else is out in the garden. He can see them through the glass doors—Alby standing under an arch woven with daffodils, wearing Suli silk of red and white and gold; the gathered friends and family standing among Marya's flowers, or sitting as some of the older ones must; the Geldcanal flowing quiet behind the low stone wall.

He remembers standing there and handing Jordan the most cutting of his broken pieces. *You're one of very few people to have tricked me.*

"You ready?"

He turns around fast, breath snagging in his chest. Jordan is standing behind him, wrapped in scarlet silk, Suli-made, with a veil of the same draped over her hair, sparkling with droplets of gold. She wears heavy bangles at her wrists and earrings shaped like little bells, and yet he didn't hear her. She's been trying to sneak up on him since she was a toddler—and finally, he didn't hear her.

Jordan knows, because of course she knows. She grins at him. "Did I really do it?"

Kaz offers her his arm, swapping his cane to his other hand. He has washed the chalk from his hair and shaved and is now dressed in traditional Suli wear like the others. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says, and it is a testament to the life he's lived that he can keep his voice from breaking.

She takes his arm, and with her free hand reaches into the folds of her dress, from which she withdraws the pocket watch—Jordie's watch. *J.R.* on the back.

"He would have loved you," Kaz hears himself say.

"*Da*," she scolds him, because now her eyes are watering, but fair is fair.

"They're waiting for us," Kaz reminds her, and pushes open the door. Wylan starts up a melody on his flute from beside the arch. The others turn their heads to watch the pair, except Alby, who was already looking.

That's a fool who's fallen and doesn't want to get up, Kaz thinks. The look is too familiar for him to disapprove.

Perhaps after this he'll have to tell Jordan that he named her. It occurs to him that she probably doesn't know. But he has more mundane things to tell her about too. The last year's apple crop, and the stray cat that had kittens in the barn (including a gray one that keeps running into the house when doors are left open), and Inej's attempts to grow tulips on either side of the walk, and the rusted plow he's been restoring, and the process he's come up with to increase his spice tolerance.

But there's time for all that. And isn't that the strangest part of it all? Isn't that the best part of it? Forty can be nothing. Forty-one can be less than that. His daughter can get married under her favorite flowers to a man that knows what they are, and she can have any life she likes and he'll be here to bear witness. Pekka Rollins' legacy ends here in this garden, when Alby takes the Rietveld name.

He looks at Jordan and nods to the watch, his hand remaining on the door. "Does it still work?"

She holds up Jordie's watch, and sure enough it's ticking, loud and sure as a heartbeat.

Kaz remembers what he told the man whose death lead to his, the assassin whose name he's forgotten. *You won't find my heart here. You'd be better off searching the seas.*

He and Jordan take their first step into the garden, out into the sun. He sees Inej glowing from the front row. The sky is warm in Ketterdam for once, the fog retreated to the harbor, somewhere far and out of sight. Jordan gives his arm a little squeeze. He can hear the watch ticking still; it's a legacy. It's a headstone in the snow.

There's an orchard here of the people he's dared to care for, growing strong in the light. Yes, he thinks. His heart is here now.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so much for sharing this with me. epilogue posts on friday <3

Epilogue: Pekka

Chapter Summary

Pekka Rollins reads his mail.

Chapter Notes

I finished this chapter on Saturday, and it was very strange all week, not having another chapter to write. It'll be stranger next Friday. I'm not sure I'll like the quiet, but maybe I'll get used to it. Sincerely, and I hope not too dramatically, thank you all *so* much. I would never have finished this if it weren't for the support of this community. So for the last time, and the most well-deserved, here are your shout-outs~

7strings_of_spaghetti, being here at the end is what counts <3

Lunarmoo, lunar my beloved <3 your comments are always particularly special to me, and your support has meant more than I can properly communicate.

The_ghost_writes, it's okay, we can all cry together, lol.

MurderousWritingClub, this story is my baby, and it too is all grown up. I have an idea of how Kaz feels.

cameliawrites, I can't offer much to cure a squished heart, except maybe to squish it further with a virtual hug.

maiden_of_crows, I don't know if it'll be any comfort, but I'm not ready either 3

thestarsinoureyes, I'm honored to have, at least in your eyes, made SOC a trilogy.

breesterkeester, there is so much here that I almost don't know how to start. This comment is so beautifully thoughtful and your analysis is spot-on.

jzmn8r, thank you for making me laugh every week. The stream-of-consciousness comments are among the best ones (although trying to pick a favorite comment is like trying to pick a favorite child).

Heiress_Kyr, it has been a good trip, it really has!

Pipperdoo, consider your affection received and returned <3

shieldmaiden19, I'll share my tissues with you <3

GNM_dreaming_girl, the domesticity of it all is truly my dream for them.

thephonyqueenofengland, of course I had to give everyone a happy ending after all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somewhere in the Kaelish countryside, Pekka Rollins collects his mail.

It's not good that he has mail at all. He shouldn't be getting anything but news. He enters the house he used to stash contraband and mistresses in and turns on the single gas lamp, but not before shutting and triple-locking the door behind him. Even in the middle of the day, this lamp lights the house; it's a hell of a price to pay for fuel, but that's better than leaving his curtains open or, Ghezen forbid, the windows themselves.

Anyone could see in. The house is in an empty, miserably windswept field, but that doesn't mean there won't be passersby. That doesn't mean they can't find him.

He swipes a hand through the dust on the side table's surface and coughs, clearing a spot to put the letter down. He doesn't look at the kitchen, but he knows there are piles of dishes and old newspapers there too. Nothing to be done about it. It isn't safe to keep help these days. Anyone can be bought or blackmailed. Anyone can have loose lips. Anyone can be a threat.

There's a paper sitting on the table that has been there for long enough that the ink has faded. It's issued straight out of Ketterdam and has an artist's engraving on the front, an image of the harbor flooded with skeletons. He doesn't look at the headline. He doesn't have to.

Idiots, he thinks. From the day that he read it he's known that skivstain Brekker and his Wraith whore aren't dead, and the Council are the same fools they've always been to believe otherwise. A demon carried off by corpses and a phoenix vanishing in flame aren't things that stay killed. And if they are, they have some haunting to do. First they'll be after the Council, and the next target, Pekka knows damn well, is *him.*

So he protects himself. He leaves Kerch and fires his staff and sets up in a forgotten house in a forgotten field with the best locks he can find and curtains that black out the outside. He keeps a gun by his bed and one in the kitchen and one in his pocket. And he searches for the one way to save himself.

It's that name that Brekker wants. His brother's name. If Pekka can give him that, he'll be spared. So he tries to remember. He obsesses over it. He puts on fancy dark mercher's clothes like he wore for the Hertzoon scam and tries reciting the old lines he used on pigeons, filling in their names. He puts on the posh, caring voice he made up for Hertzoon and tries saying it like that. He cooks approximations of the same food his false wife made to see if the smells will bring it back. *Kaz and. Kaz and— Kaz and—*

It doesn't come. Everyone else from that damned scheme is dead. He'd go back to the house or the bank, but that means going back to the city. He paces the field and wanders through the

neighboring forest, racking his brain. “Kaz and who? Dammit, Kaz and—who was the other one? Please, *please*— ”

He has to do it. He has to remember or else he has nothing. Over and over again, he ends up on his knees, begging, and the soil under him is the cold tile of the Church of Barter. The trees are his men, turning their faces away. There’s no one left to plead to.

So now he sits here, with a ragged newspaper and a letter he shouldn’t have gotten.

It’s from Alby.

How did Alby know where to find him? How did anyone? They’re coming. That’s what Alby has written to say. They’re coming after him and he can’t do anything to stop them because he can’t give them what they want. He doesn’t have it. He doesn’t know it. The Wraith is going to carve out his heart.

The letter is short.

Father,

This is the last you’ll hear from me, I think. But I thought I should at least share this news with you, in place of a proper goodbye.

I got married. I’m sure you wouldn’t like her, but I do, quite a lot actually. She’s brave and clever and it’s nothing short of a miracle that I found her, and now she’s my wife. I’ve taken her name, by the way. You might understand that I wanted a change.

Speaking of which, I came into some money a few years ago and made a donation to the university. They used it to establish a new building—the Koen Anholts School of History. I think Koen would have liked that. And yes, I’m still in the city; I’m afraid you didn’t manage to scare me out of it, although I suppose you know that too.

I’ll close this with the best regards I can give you, which I admit isn’t much. I imagine you’re alone these days. That’s probably for the best.

Oh, I almost forgot—the girl I married? Her name is Jordan.

Sincerely,

Alby Rietveld

Pekka folds up the letter into smaller and smaller squares until he can make it go no further. He puts it in his pocket and goes outside, into the field of too-tall grass, under a sky that’s clouding over. He keeps walking, deep into the woods, on a meaningless trail unlike all the other meaningless trails he’s made before.

In a patch of shadow, he stops and takes out the letter again. He unfolds it and sits on a rotting log. He reads it over once more.

The letter falls out of his hands and drifts slowly to the black soil. Somewhere through the trees, a crow calls.

“That was it,” Pekka says to no one. “That was his name.”

Chapter End Notes

that ending line has lived in my head for three years.

also....big news if you want to read more of my writing! I am co-authoring a 1920s dark academia mystery with my sister, who was also a huge part of the making of this fic. We have a brand-new shiny discord server to share updates and chat about the book, and I'd love to see you all there!

NMNF <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!